

To Be Your Own Martyr

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/33237544) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/33237544>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Fandoms:	Minecraft (Video Game) , Dream SMP
Relationships:	Wilbur Soot & TommyInnit , Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & Phil Watson , Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , Ranboo & TommyInnit & Toby Smith Tubbo
Characters:	Wilbur Soot , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , Toby Smith Tubbo , Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Superheroes/Superpowers , Hero Wilbur Soot , Vigilante TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Hero Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Hero Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Angst , Hurt/Comfort , More hurt than comfort though lol , Angst with a Happy Ending , Assumed Character Death , Violence , Crime , Its a superhero fic you know , Injury , Secret Identity , Identity Reveal , Miscommunication , Explicit Language , Wilbur is a goddamn mess in this one lmao , Drugs , Humor , Crime boys brotherly dynamic , Librarian Tommy Innit , because why not , Fluff , Fluff and Angst , Vigilante Toby Smith Tubbo , Vigilante Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , super powers , Constant abuse of italics , What can I say they add ☆**spice**☆
Language:	English
Collections:	SBI superheroes/powers au my beloved , wow i really am reading mc fanfiction☺☺ , ctommy ctommy chomolo chommy , SBI Superpower fics bc I have issues , top tier SBI/crimeboys fics that distract my from my homework , Superpowered SBI Fics , Found family to make me feel something , SleepyBois Fics that I like <3 , Best dsmg fics to read for the summer vacation , MMR
Stats:	Published: 2021-08-14 Completed: 2022-08-24 Words: 68,172 Chapters: 16/16

To Be Your Own Martyr

by [Sunshine_3](#)

Summary

Jaded, lonely, and feeling trapped in the life of a hero, Wilbur Soot is just about ready to give up on humanity.

That is- until he meets Tommy, a bright, loud teenager who makes it the tiniest bit easier to breathe.

Bored as hell and shouldering the burden of protecting his district on his own, Tommy Innit is just looking for someone to lean on.

That is- until he meets Wilbur, a clingy, tall bastard (in his most humble, personal opinion) who makes life the tiniest bit less lonely.

And even as things begin to heat up within the outer districts, drawing both heroes and the city's newest vigilante to the scene, Wilbur and Tommy have each other.

And they wouldn't give it up for anything.

But then again...some good things just aren't meant to last, are they?

The story of a rising criminal empire, a fallen hero, and good old-fashioned *revenge*.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

- Inspired by [you're gonna go far, kid](#) by [greyquills](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

They say history doesn't repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme. And now here I am, one year later once again writing superhero fics- except now it's for Minecraft instead of Marvel. What a wild world we live in.

Anyway, I'm actually really excited about this one, I got god awful Vigilante AU brainrot in early July, and it's been killing me ever since. The work this is inspired by doesn't really relate to the plot of this at all, it's just that I blame that fic for the origins of this one. (Go read it, it's epic and super well done in my opinion)

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur Soot liked to consider himself a wise person.

He knew many things, had plenty of age-old truths and half-baked proverbs rattling around in his brain. Quite the philosopher, he was.

For instance, he knew that being a hero wasn't all that it was cracked up to be.

Sure, the pay was nice. The publicity was plentiful, and for someone like Wilbur, who hardy minded and even enjoyed the limelight some days, that was a plus. Feeling like he had control, a chance to improve his city and to make the world a better place was another.

But as glamorous as the press always made the hero life out to be, it felt more like an uphill battle the longer Wilbur spent under his alias. That constant, low worry that Phil and Techno might not make it home okay one of these days. Aching all the time, a deep sort of weariness soaking into his bones after each patrol, a hopelessness tugging at him. Being faced with the injustices of the world, the worst that people could do to each other day after day after day and wondering *is this even worth it?*

A couple years into the job, and his world blurred into a stale, grey routine. Patrol. Fight crime. Go home, fill out a report. Throw Phil a weary smile as his dad was on the way out the door. Drink an unholy amount of coffee and pray it does something for the ever-present bags under his eyes. Tell Techno to get some rest and pretend that his brother will actually listen, then pretend to do the same.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

Days flew by in an incomprehensible mess, each one the same variation over and over, and yet somehow each was entirely unmemorable.

That's how it was.

Dull. Bland. Fake smiles and hastily covered-up bruises for the press when he lost a fight he should've won.

Feeling more and more hopeless as crime steadily ticked up in the lower, outer districts, as the hero guild seemed to care less and less about who did what, who patrolled where. And yet Wilbur kept fighting for the city he cared so much about, dedicated to the one thing that mattered outside his family. Despite all this, he kept fighting.

That's how it was.

Phil casted him worried glances, Techno dragged him to training as a distraction, both trying to lift his hopes and keep him happy.

But they were top-ranking heroes, kept in the Central and upper districts, brought out for the bigger villains, the major fights. They didn't patrol the lower districts the way Wilbur did, didn't see things falling apart, even as his single pair of hands tried so fucking hard to pull everything together.

There were other mid-ranking heroes, of course. It's not like he was the only one around. But no one else wanted to deal with the lesser, lower districts. They didn't care enough, not in the way Wilbur did. They saw run down, wasting streets filled by busy, exhausted people, and far too many of them to bother trying to protect at that.

Wilbur just saw people.

People who needed help, who he needed to try to save. He had the power, the abilities, the publicity, the support. He had to try.

And some days it felt all felt like an endless tide, a hopeless sort of endeavor. Like trying to bail a sinking boat with a teaspoon- not impossible, depending on the circumstances- but exhausting, constantly pushing one to finally just give in, give up.

Wilbur refused. He might've been driving himself into the ground, but he couldn't let himself go like that.

Things were shit, but that's just how it was.

Plain and simple.

Until one day, it wasn't.

Which brings forth another sliver of wisdom Wilbur had learned over the years: the universe treats good people- the best people- like shit.

Like Phil and Techno, or the few kindhearted souls in the lower districts who refused to give up as much as Wilbur, and one particular teenager named Tommy Innit.

A skinny, loud-mouthed, standoffish little shit who had tripped his way into Wilbur's life by the purest of chances.

And easily the very reason Wilbur hadn't given up his faith in humanity, just quite yet.

It all began one lackluster day in early December. The sky was slate grey, a bland sort of look, doing little to encourage the holiday spirit that the high end shops of the Central district were desperately trying to shove down people's throats. Not that Wilbur gave a shit, anyway- holidays hadn't truly been a thing for him in years. It was a bit difficult when your whole family had stubbornly dedicated themselves to a life of heroism. And friends?

Well, Wilbur didn't have friends.

Too dangerous, too risky. Not enough time, and no one would be crazy enough to put up with a walking dumpster fire like him anyway.

Crime in this city never bothered to take a break. Heroes didn't either, and his family was no exception.

At the moment, Wilbur lay on top of the covers on his bed, staring listlessly at the ceiling. The bed was far less used than it should've been. He preferred caffeine to sleep at this point, or a quick crash on the sofa, or even slumping over at a desk chair to actual decent rest. He always insisted to Phil that it was good- kept him on edge, able to be always on the go. It was better to be able to function on a few hours of sleep and then spoil yourself with the actual right number of hours than to ruin your day with the opposite.

His father would cast a disapproving look in his direction, but didn't bother to argue the point.

(Everyone was tired around here.)

Not to say they didn't care about one another- it was the exact opposite. Wilbur loved his father and brother with everything he had. Most moments were spent in a weary sort of peace: soft smiles, attempts to make sure no one was hiding injuries, the rare chance to eat dinner together. It was just- difficult, at times. But it's not like they were home together for a long enough stretch of time to spend it arguing, anyway.

Except for today.

Today was an exception to that rule, apparently.

The muffled sound of Phil and Techno's grating voices filtered through the wall, and Wilbur turned over, staring out the window instead of at the plastered ceiling, trying to block it all

out. They were having a spat about something most likely trivial and stupid, fried nerves being taken out on one another.

Not that Wilbur could fault them, though- he knew the feeling well enough.

Wilbur sighed through his nose, two seconds away from shoving a pillow over his head to be able to check out in peace. Techno's voice rose.

"-act like I don't worry about it just as much as you do! More and more, I regret ever taking your side in that decision-"

"It was his choice, Tech! You know as well as I do that we couldn't have stopped Wil from choosing this-"

Wilbur stiffened at the sound of his name, quickly focusing in on the muffled words.

"He's not built for it, not in the way that we are! He's too- too *kind* for this type'a work. He just mopes about, Phil, drinking black coffee like some kinda maniac and refusin' to let me help! I'm sick of watchin' my brother waste away like this- he wasn't cut out for it. I should have-" A heavy, resigned sigh. "I shouldn't have let Wilbur do this to himself."

Wilbur flinched, the words clearly said in a fit of worry, anxiety- but they stung all the same.

"First of all, that's not your responsibility."

"It's just-"

"Trust me mate, I know. But you can't just force him to take a break from patrol."

"I was thinkin' more like take him off the force," Techno grumbled.

"He's an adult, same as you. I don't care if he's your younger brother, Tech, we need to let him make his own choices."

"Those *choices* are ruinin' him, Phil. Try to tell me otherwise."

A beat of silence, in which Wilbur waited for a disagreement that never came. A frown tugged at his lips.

I haven't gotten that bad, have I? He wondered, glancing about the room. Wilbur was met with empty coffee mugs, rumpled blankets, the pieces of gear strewn about carelessly. *Okay- maybe Techno has a point about the coffee thing, but still. I'm not a shit hero.*

Fists clenched, he stared out into the steel-grey sky. *I'm not. I can fucking handle it.*

And who cares if he couldn't?

He'd been doing this for years now, ever since he was old enough to be let into the training program. People needed him. Simple as that.

The arguing outside his door didn't stop. Irritated, Wilbur rolled out of bed, stepping over stacked reports shoved in less-than meticulous piles, a scattered first-aid kit, and assorted pieces of his hero suit. He wrenched the door open, scowl on his face.

The sound died immediately.

"Are you two fucking done yet? Some people are trying to rest around here."

Phil at least had the decency to look sheepish, probably realizing having a yelling match about a person right outside their bedroom door wasn't the best move to make. Techno, not so much. His brother was on his way out the door for his evening patrol, and the snarling boar mask on his face did not help to soften the residual tension from the fight.

Techno scoffed. "You? Restin'? Nice one, Wilbur. Real funny."

Wilbur squinted at him, still a bit out of it. "The fuck are you trying to say, prick?"

"I'm sayin' -"

"Boys," Phil cut in, not willing to rehash the argument that had just ended. "Enough."

Reluctantly, they both backed down.

Grumbling, Wilbur pushed between them, plodding his way over to the kitchen in mismatched socks and snatching a mug from the cupboard. The shelf was getting concerning empty. He'd probably have to do a round up in his room again.

Maybe I should just start drinking from the pot, he mused, pouring himself god knows what number cup of coffee for the day. *Phil would probably bitch about germs or some shit, though.*

Wilbur took a sip, hissing out a curse as it burned his tongue. One would think he would learn by now, right? Apparently not.

There were eyes on his back. He turned, raising an eyebrow over the lip of the mug. "What?"

Techno looked on with disapproval, worry tense in his shoulders, "You've got a problem, Wilbur."

Surprisingly, Phil nodded in agreement.

Wilbur shrugged it off. "Coffee is good shit, what do you want from me? I could switch to energy drinks, if you'd like."

Phil wrinkled his nose. "God- please don't."

Wilbur snickered, coming back out of the kitchen, aiming to disappear back into his cave of solitude for a few more hours before his own patrol shift. A hand on his chest stopped him before he could reach the door.

He sighed. “Yes, Techno?”

“You’re not goin’ back in there.”

“Yes I am.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Phil-“ Wilbur whined, turning to his father for support.

Phil shook his head, wandering away. “Only so much I can argue against, mate,” he called over his shoulder. “He’s got a point- that shit isn’t healthy.”

Wilbur grumbled at the betrayal, pushing Techno away with one hand, clutching his precious mug with the other. He slumped against the doorframe. “I hate this.”

“Dramatic,” Techno deadpanned.

“What am I supposed to do for the next like- four hours? Everything of mine is in there!” Wilbur gestured at his room, through the open door that gave a clear view of all the *everything* scattered around the floor and every available flat surface.

Techno smiled, an expression that he did not like one bit. “I’m glad you asked! I’ve got just the thing- wait here.”

His brother disappeared for a moment, and before Wilbur even had the chance to protest, a couple of books were being dumped in his arms.

“Oi! Watch the coffee!”

“You can return these for me,” Techno replied, almost smug. “Get out of the house, get some social interaction for once. Can’t believe *I’m* the one lecturin’ you about talking to other people, but here we are.”

“I talk to people,” Wilbur muttered, trying to adjust his hold on the books without dropping them or his coffee.

“Phil and I don’t count.”

“I wasn’t talking about you, idiot.”

Techno raised an eyebrow, not believing it for a second. “Then who?”

Wilbur’s mind went to his last couple of patrols in the outer districts, to someone who seemed to have had his same passion- the same willingness to keep fighting for those who needed it, no matter the cost. A person who Wilbur might just call a hero, even if he wasn’t legally one.

A person he might even call a friend.

But the ‘legal’ bit made the rebuttal stick to his tongue, and he stayed silent.

“Uh huh. That’s what I thought. Just take ‘em, Wil, it’ll be good for you.”

And maybe it was the lingering exhaustion behind the irritation in his brother’s eyes, the half-concealed worry, both buried beneath a smile meant to be convincing, consoling- and were anything but. Or maybe it was the chance to get the fuck out of the house, to escape the implications of the conversation he had just overheard, even for a little while.

Either way, that was how Wilbur now found himself trudging along a slightly slushy sidewalk, the weather cold enough to dump a dusting of snow on their unfortunate asses, but not kind enough to let it stay fresh, just yet. A crosswalk symbol turned to a hand in front of him, and Wilbur huffed in annoyance, breath clouding before his face. He stopped, leaning against a lamppost as cars slid by, adjusting the pile of books in his arms.

Of course Techno had to get his books from a library practically all the way across the city, one riding the outskirts of the lower districts. Some garbage about “They have the actual classics there- people in the upper districts don’t read anything decent” and “I like the atmosphere of the place”, whatever the fuck that meant. Apparently ebooks were out of the question, too. Fucking barbaric, that man was.

Not to say Wilbur had anything against going to the outer districts- he lived in Central, the nicest, richest part of the city, but he knew this area well enough from patrols and the occasional visit. It was having to walk there in this abysmal weather that he was so bothered about. And yes- public transportation was a thing. But have *you* ever been on a city bus with nosy, loud strangers on less than five hours of sleep when you have places to be? Yeah, no thanks.

He could’ve worn gloves, though. Wilbur wasn’t too far up his own ass to not admit that numb hands weren’t very enjoyable.

The light in front of him changed. Wilbur sped through the crosswalk, eyes locked on the silhouette of building on the larger side down the street, with wider steps and even an attempt at shrubbery in front.

Lower Town Municipal Library read the worn placard out front.

Wilbur didn’t hesitate to climb the steps and elbow his way through the glass doors. If it was at least slightly warmer inside than it was outside, he didn’t give a shit about the quality of the building, even if the name could use a lot of work.

He stepped through the entry way, shoes squeaking on the faded wooden floor. Wilbur wandered up to the empty front desk, looking for some sort of cart in order to just dump the books and head on home. But of course, nothing but scratched, worn wood and messy papers in sight. Wilbur set the books down with a thump on the desk, craning his neck to see if there was an employee nearby.

“Hello?” he said quietly, feeling somehow awkward about disturbing the silence of the place. “I’ve got some books? Anyone?”

No reply.

He glanced about the rickety isles off to the side, ancient light bulbs flickering a little above him. Distantly, someone pushed a chair in, the sound echoing. Wilbur tried again.

“Hello? *Anyone?*”

A tinny bell rang right by his ear. An embarrassing shriek tore out of his mouth, and he whipped around. A scrawny blond teenager looked back at him, one finger still on the button of a tiny brass bell, expression dead serious.

“The fuck was that for?” Wilbur demanded, still trying to calm his racing heart.

“You’re being loud,” the kid replied, straight faced, “This is a fucking library, idiot.”

“Well excuse me for trying to return these,” he grumbled, poking at the pile of books. “And there was no employee person at the desk. What was I supposed to do?”

The kid looked entirely unimpressed. A hand pointed to the bell, blue eyes screaming *You are fucking incompetent.*

He felt his ears go red. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

The kid scooted around the side of the desk, pulling Techno’s stack of books closer, beginning to sort through the titles.

“Wait, you work here?”

A hum of confirmation, the last of the books being looked at, the name of each quickly written down.

“Don’t kids your age work at, I don’t know- restaurants or something? Why are you in a library?”

The teen squinted up at him through unruly blond hair. “Why do you give a shit?”

Wilbur shrugged, tucking his hands into the pockets of the long coat he was wearing. “Just curious I guess.”

“Cool,” the books were set aside, “Just so you know, you’ve got a- what’s your name?”

“Wilbur.”

“You’ve got a shit taste in literature, Wilbur.”

He spluttered. “They’re not even-“

“I’m gonna go shelve these,” the kid said, wandering away into the maze of shelves.

“Wait a minute! I’m not gonna tolerate this slander, you insufferable little child-“

“Tommy,” the kid- Tommy, interrupted, “Not a child.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Wilbur huffed, following him down the isles. He wasn’t sure why he felt to need to defend his honor to this kid, but he kept on anyways. “I do *not* have shit taste.”

Tommy stood up from where he had crouched to slot a book into place on a lower shelf. The top book was lifted off of the stack in his arms and held up. He leveled Wilbur with a look. “This is a Greek Mythology textbook, *Wilbur*. You disgust me.”

He rolled his eyes, following Tommy as they rounded another corner, books slowly disappearing from the pile in the other’s hands.

“Yeah, well you’re the one who swears at random strangers just trying to run some fucking errands. Learn some manners, child.”

“Don’t insult my personality, bitch-“

“Sorry, wasn’t aware you had one.”

“You sick fuck-“

“Prick.”

“Dickhead!”

“Little *bastard*-“

“Pussy ass-“

“Okay! Enough,” Wilbur cut him off with a groan, pinching the bridge of his nose to hide a slow-blooming smile, “God, you’re insufferable, aren’t you?”

Tommy stood on his tiptoes, shoving the last of the books into place. He turned around with a massive grin, leaning casually against the shelf. “What can I say? I’m an entertainer.”

Wilbur snorted despite himself, fighting back a full on laugh. No way was he going give into this- this little *gremlin* of a gangly teenage boy. Absolutely not.

Before he knew it, they were back at the front desk, having followed Tommy back to the main entrance. The world outside the foggy, scuffed glass was as bleak as ever, but somehow, the aged interior of the library seemed more vibrant than before. Wilbur took a few steps to leave, but hesitated.

Something held him back.

Something about this kid just- he didn’t know. Maybe it was the stupid smile on his own face, the fact that he hadn’t even thought about patrol for even one minute in the time he had spent

heckling this kid. Or maybe he was just lonely as fuck, if he stopped to think about it long enough.

(Not that anyone would ever hear him admit to the second one.)

“You’re leaving me already?” Tommy asked, leaning over the desk, chin propped in his palm. “That’s rather rude of you, Wilbur. To abandon a man in his time of need like this, you must be fuckin’ heartless. For shame, for shame.”

He let out a tiny chuckle at that one, slipping his hands back into his pockets. “What, not a fan of your job, Tommy?”

“Nah,” he replied with a shrug, “Just bored as shit. No one bothers to come in ‘ere during the day, and they’re never any fun.”

“Are you saying I’m fun?”

“Fuck no. You suck ass. I’ve never met someone so disrespectful in my life.”

“Sorry,” Wilbur shot back, “I didn’t know I wore a mirror today.”

“Get a fuckin’ hobby, dude. Stop bullying children.”

“Oh, so *now* you’re a child, huh?”

And thank the lucky stars that the library was as empty as it was, because the screaming match and subsequent laughter that followed would’ve been impossible to ignore, even for the best of readers.

When Wilbur came trudging through the front door of the house, fingers once again stiff with cold, there was still a faint smile on his face. A genuine one- not the faded memory of it, laced with sarcasm or thinly veiled resentment, but the true thing. He slid off the jacket, throwing it haphazardly in the direction of a hook and pretending that it had actually landed.

He breezed through the living room, humming a bit, only half focused on the patrol that he was going to be late for, at this rate.

“Something happen, Wil?”

He paused, turning back to look at his father, sprawled across the couch with an almost bewildered expression on his face.

He shrugged. “Not much- you should tell Techno he owes me for being so kind and helpful by the way- why?”

Phil’s eyebrows rose, a slight quirk to his own lips. “You’re smiling, mate. Like, an actual smile. Since when did you still do that?”

“Oh fuck off, old man,” Wilbur groaned, turning away and heading off to his room to put on his suit. “This is why I don’t leave my room- it’s because of you, Phil,” he called back, before

jamming the door closed.

But when he passed the section of the outer districts that housed the library that night on patrol, Wilbur couldn't help but think about the strange interaction.

Huh, he thought, stopping on the edge of a building across the road, looking down at the faint light washing the sidewalk through the shitty glass doors.

Maybe Phil had a point.

Before he could dwell on it too long, though, an alert came through his comm, directing him toward the faint warble of sirens. Power surged to his hands, the fingertips tingling, abilities locked and loaded, practically begging for a proper fight.

Wilbur cast one last glance at the place before turning on his heel and leaping into the night.

Heroes didn't have time for whatever this- *reminiscing* was, and Wilbur was no exception. There was work to do.

He'd think about it later.

Chapter End Notes

This one starts off a little slow, but once we get the ball rolling- oh boy. It's gonna be freaking awesome, just you wait.

Updates on this one are gonna be a lot more sporadic and spaced out than usual (which is saying something considering my update schedule is messy enough already lmao) just warning y'all ahead of time. That aside, hope y'all have as much fun reading this one as I know I'm going to have writing it :)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Says chapters will be more spread out

Proceeds to write a decently long chapter in record time while also working on an update for a separate work

In my defense, I got my school computer back today. Keyboard go brrr

I'm actually really vibing with this already, and I am so proud of myself for coming up with Tommy's powers and name. I've seen so many memes about everyone recycling the same names/powers for SBI, so I tried my best to shake em up a little. Hopefully y'all like them as much as I do lol.

Enjoy, my friends

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The fucking microwave was beeping.

It was a steady, high sound. A constant rhythm that was patiently drilling its way into his skull, slowly doing its best to drive him insane.

Considering Tommy had been the one to set the timer on it, he shouldn't have been surprised now that it was going off. And really, all that he had to do was get up and press a button to end this inhumane torture, but it was just so *far*. And the floor had *just* gotten to the point where it wasn't wildly uncomfortable to lay on.

The beeping kept on.

Fuckin' hell.

Groaning, Tommy rolled over, pushing onto hands and knees. He got to his feet, feeling for all the world like an old man with broken kneecaps or some shit. Then again, with all the beatings he had taken when he first started out with the whole vigilante shtick, it wouldn't be much of a surprise he if *had* broken a knee somewhere in there.

He took a few steps into the kitchen, jamming a thumb into the 'end' button. A dull green 9:32 blinked back at him from the microwave's clock, confirming that nap time was officially over. How rude. With a stretch, Tommy plodded out of the tiny kitchen, wandering through the sad excuse of a living room over to the single bedroom that his apartment contained.

He flung open the door to the bedroom closet, scooping up the wrinkled mess of red, black, and white fabric. He held the suit up, wrinkling his nose at the state of it. The thing was due for a wash, and considering he was a teenage boy with incredibly low standards, that was saying something.

Tommy slipped the thing on with practiced ease, a combination of slim cargo-esque pants with awesome white detailing, a black vest reinforced with protective paneling, and a red long sleeve that he had gotten from a random sports store years ago and had since pinned on a white piece of fabric to make a hood. The shirt even had the little holes that you could stick your thumbs through to cover your palms, which often came in handy. Sometimes he even threw on a red jacket, too, just to add some spice. Never because he got cold, or anything- no way. Big men didn't get *cold*.

Black combat boots and his fitted face mask completed the look.

The mask was his favorite part of the outfit.

Flexible yet firm enough to not suction to his skin, it had a voice changing device built into it and was capable of filtering out toxins or smoke in the air to some extent. There were even cool red and white decals on the stiff black surface. The piece had been a gift from Honeybee, a fellow vigilante who operated with a friend called Enderwalk in a different section of the city, located on the opposite side of Central.

(At least- he was pretty sure Bee was a vigilante and not a low-tier villain. The dude was a little too casual with the word 'murder' for Tommy to be entirely sure about that one.)

Ender and Bee were really rather nice, discussions of murder aside. Great with tech, and always willing to trek to his territory to help out if there was a major case to take on or a bust Tommy knew would require backup. He didn't know the duo's identities, and they didn't know his. They knew each other's voices, and that was about it. But it was cool- they didn't need to know.

There was a certain level of trust they placed in one another, a benefit of the doubt that came with stumbling across someone who was actually willing to step up when the Hero Guild in Central fell short. If it meant another set of helping hands, no one was gonna ask any questions.

Having friends in the field was rather nice, Tommy had discovered.

He stepped out of his bedroom, coming face to face with the pretty much bare-bones of his little apartment.

Wouldn't hurt to have some outside of it, though, he thought, frowning a bit at the drab space.

But at least he had an apartment, and a decent one at that. In Lower, being a parentless teen living off only your own income with no other family to your name, it was nothing to sneeze at. Not that Tommy would complain, either. He was rather proud of everything he had accomplished for himself over the years: getting his home, fighting his way through online school at the ancient computer in the local library, getting a full-time job at said library, and

then becoming one of the best illegal crime fighters in the entire city. He had come a long way, that was for sure.

Doesn't mean he couldn't get lonely, though.

Tommy snapped himself out of it, making his way over to the window on the far wall. "This isn't the time for wallowing, bitch," he muttered to himself, easing open the glass, "We've got work to do."

He scrambled through, popping up onto the rickety fire escape just outside. From there, he aimed for the rooftops.

Not to brag or anything, but Tommy was incredibly good at parkour, if he did say so himself. Light on his feet, quick reflexes, and a master at clearing jumps. And that was *without* any sort of ability, thank you very much.

Tommy paused on the edge of the apartment complex's roof, gazing out over the darkened streets. The street lights flickered. Old bulbs only half-illuminated crumbling sidewalks with far too many weeds growing in the cracks. The wind trickled through the alleyways, tangling in clotheslines stretched thin and fraying telephone wires, whipping trash up from the ground as it went. A couple cars rolled past, their headlights briefly lighting up the fronts of buildings that had seen better days. Those days were long gone.

Tommy loved it.

It may be messy and dirty and falling apart, but this was his home. Lower born and Lower raised, this was his community. *This* was his family, no matter how distant the relatives.

And you could damn well count on him to protect it.

With a final second to soak in the familiar sights, Tommy turned, boots digging into brick, and set off into the night.

At first, patrol was fairly routine, a typical night out on the town. Stopping a mugging here, intercepting a car thief there, scolding a group of kids for the new graffiti art on the side of an ancient corner drugstore (but only after taking a second to admire their actually rather nice work). You know, the usual.

It wasn't until the time had crept past one in the morning when things began to get a bit strange. Or well- stranger than usual. When you wander the streets of a city populated by powered individuals in the witching hours of the night, you get used to seeing some weird shit. But in this case, it wasn't weird, so much as *unnerving*.

He caught the edge of a drainpipe, constant movement coming to a stop at the sound of agitated voices below. Sandwiched between buildings and a couple rusty dumpsters were two figures, too hidden in shadow for him to get a clear view of what exactly he was dealing with. Careful as to not make a sound, Tommy dangled from the pipe, bracing against the rough brick beneath his hands. Slowly, he shimmied his way down to the floor of the alley, trying his very best to remain unseen. Ducking behind a dumpster, he held his breath, listening for the sound of someone being alerted to his presence.

Nothing.

He let the breath go.

The two people argued on.

“Nah man, I’m not taking that shit from you!”

“It’s good- trust me. Not sure what it’s for, but I got it from outside that empty warehouse on the edge of that one industrial sector! You know- it’s got all those trucks coming and going-”

The first person- a woman, based on height and voice- shook her head, taking a step back. There was a clear tone of distrust and wariness in her words. “You don’t even know what the fuck it does, do you?”

Tommy edged closer, slinking around the front of the dumpster to get a better look at the person furthest from the alleyway entrance, the one who appeared to be trying to pawn off the mysterious thing on the lady across from them both.

Clearly, something incredibly shady was going down, and Tommy had a front row seat.

“No, but just take a look, alright?” They fumbled for their pocket, pulling out some sort of tube, the metal-capped ends of it glinting in the dim light from a building across the road. “It’s got this fancy engraved label in the glass and everything. Even the case alone is gotta be worth something, right?” They held it out in an open palm, an offering.

Tommy was sorely tempted to lunge forward and snatch it now while it was in reach. But he wasn’t an idiot, either. Even with his own ability, charging head-first into a situation with potential unknown supers was a stupid, risky mistake that he wasn’t planning on re-making anytime soon. Instead, he forced himself to wait for the woman to leave, and based on the tide of the current conversation, that would be soon.

She glared at them. “I’m not risking my own ass for a potential profit based on your estimated worth of a glass vial. Do I look like a fool to you?”

“No, I-”

“Nice try,” she spat, turning away. “But you’ll have to drag somebody else into your shit. It’s not gonna be me.”

The other person’s hand fell to their side, and silence fell over the alley as the woman’s footsteps faded away. Tommy watched as their fingers tightened around the glass vial, and he

couldn't help but worry about it breaking in their grip.

"Fucking hell," they muttered, letting out a high, distressed laugh. A hand ran through their hair. "A guy goes through all this trouble to get his hands on something worthwhile for once- and this is how he's treated." The man opened his fist, staring down at the tube in it with mixed emotion. "This probably isn't even worth anything, anyway."

"Then I don't think you'd mind me taking it off your hands then, yeah?"

The man's head snapped up at the sound of Tommy's voice, immediately going tense. He stuffed the vial back in his pocket, and a knife took its place. "Who's there?"

"Awe," Tommy whined, melting out of the shadows. A grin cut across his face, hidden by the mask on his face, but the expression translated well enough if the man's reaction was anything to go by. "You don't recognize me?"

He raised hands that were already folded into fists, power surging through his veins. With a flick of the wrist, a soft red glow washed over their faces and the walls caging them both in. "It's a pity- I thought I was finally making a name for myself around here."

Tommy caught the second that it dawned on the man who exactly he was standing in front of, the recognition clear on his pale face. "You've got to be shitting me."

"I don't tend to do that in public," Tommy joked. "TMI, man."

The guy held up his knife, but Tommy could easily see the way his fingers trembled on the handle. "Shut up! I don't care about your stupid jokes, I don't care if you've finally found something to call yourself while you're out here terrorizing innocent people-"

"Okay, first of all," Tommy began, "I'm working on the whole name bit. Cut a man some slack would you?" The man glared, readying his stance for a fight, knife held up. "And secondly," Tommy said, copying the movement with a grin and a nod at the guy's pocket. "You, my friend, are anything but innocent."

"I'll fucking kill you," the other snarled. His eyes darted wildly, fear making him a skittish, scared animal.

Tommy shrugged. "You can try."

The red glow grew brighter.

The man lunged.

Tommy simply lifted his forearm, the translucent red shield of energy floating in front of it repelling the swipe of the knife with ease. The blade scratched across the surface like a pane of glass, a shower of miniscule scarlet shards sprinkling on the dirty ground. He lowered his arm, eyes narrowing over the edge of the mirrored discs braced in front of his body.

The nervous swallow from his opponent was visible.

“You sure you don’t want to just hand that vial over, buddy?” Tommy tried, always willing to take the easy way out if it meant less work on his end. He liked to be merciful when he could. “I’d even forgive you for that last bit, if you’d like.”

“No way,” the man sneered, fear and ego having already taken over.

Tommy shrugged again. “Suit yourself.”

This time, he was the one to charge.

The guy didn’t stand a chance. Another sloppy slash, deflected with his left arm. Tommy ducked a punch with the man’s empty hand, dropping to a crouch and sweeping out with a foot. The other stumbled, pushed off balance. Tommy popped back up to his feet, darting forward. In a practiced movement, he caught the edge of one of the discs under the end of the knife’s handle, prying it from the other’s hands. The other shield batted it from the air, and it went sailing into the darkness, far out of reach.

A knee to the gut, and the man was up against the wall with a startlingly loud crunch before sliding to the ground with a groan. Tommy cringed at the sound.

Normally, he tried his best to cause as few major injuries as possible. Sure, these people were criminals, and a hard life didn’t excuse breaking the law at another’s expense. Still, most people had their reasons, and those reasons hardly justified broken arms or smashed ribs.

“Shit dude, are you okay?”

Blurily, the man lifted his head, still glaring. “What’s it to you?”

“I’ll take that as a yes, then,” Tommy muttered, moving closer. With another flick of his wrists, the shields dissipated, the red energy sinking back into his arms. He held up a hand, trying to show the guy he wasn’t going to hit him while pulling a zip tie from a pants pocket with the other. “I’m not gonna fight you anymore, as long as you cooperate with me.”

“Bite me, kid,” he spat, but there was less animosity in it than before. The reality of the situation was probably catching up to the guy, who just seemed exhausted and resigned at this point. He hardly even resisted as Tommy leaned him away from the wall, tying the man’s hands behind his back.

With the risk of a surprise punch to the face eliminated, Tommy crouched down beside him. He reached inside of the guy’s pocket, looking to pull out the vial stashed there. The sharp bite of broken glass met his fingers. Cursing, Tommy snatched his hand back, nursing a few stinging cuts. Belatedly, he realized that probably hadn’t been his brightest of ideas.

Hopefully whatever was in that thing was nothing dangerous, he thought, glancing down at the slight shimmer of liquid mixing with welling spots of blood on his fingertips, Or I am going to be incredibly fucked. He stood, wiping his hands off on his cargo pants, knowing well enough by now that the blood would blend in just fine with the black fabric. *Should probably invest in some proper gloves, now that I think about it.*

“Hey,” he said, looking down at the man before him, who lifted his head wearily. “You said you got that vial from a warehouse in the industrial district, right?”

The guy’s eyes widened, jaw falling slack for a second. “You heard all of that?” He glanced nervously into the shadows, as if there would be more vigilantes just waiting to pop out of the woodwork. “How long were you just waiting here to beat me up?”

“None of your business, dick. Answer the question.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “It was near the highway- got this massive broken neon sign right outside. Can’t miss it.”

Tommy nodded along, rifling through his pockets to pull out a flip phone, an ancient thing he used as a burner to alert the cops to come pick up after him. “What the fuck were you doing out there, dude? It’s practically a rotting wasteland.”

A shrug. “You got your secrets, I got mine.”

Tommy hummed, pressing the button to call the pre-programmed number for the police station’s line. “Got me there.” He stepped away, quickly dropping an anonymous tip about a man who should be taken in. Technically, the whole selling-the-creepy-high-tech-vial thing hadn’t actually gone down, but the dude had trespassed, and Tommy had no doubt this wasn’t the only botched drug deal the man had made in the past. Worst comes to worst, the guy spent a night safe in the security of a jail cell and out of the cold.

He flipped the phone shut with a snap, stuffing it back into his pocket. “Well,” he said, moving back over to the downspout that had brought him into the alley in the first place, “The boys in blue are on their way. Hopefully I won’t be seeing your ugly face again- but no promises, right?”

There was no response. Not like he expected one anyway.

The cops came shortly after. Tommy lingered at the scene, the moon getting low enough in the sky that he knew it was about time to head home so there would be enough time to collapse for a few hours before another shift at the library tomorrow. He hovered by the edge of the roof, hidden by the shadow of a wheezing A/C unit, observing as the man was picked up and hauled away.

It wasn’t an unusual case, dealing with illegal substances around here. Living in Lower was hard shit- Tommy could attest to that one personally. Every person dealt with that differently, and not necessarily in healthy ways. So busting the occasional drug deal? Simple, run-of -the-mill stuff.

This instance, though, Tommy couldn’t help but feel a distinct sense of uneasiness. Something about the way that vial had looked- far too clean and well made to be in the hands of someone in this type of place. Not to mention the supposed drug itself- slightly milky in color, and if Tommy didn’t know better, he could’ve sworn that it had *glowed* faintly.

And when it got on the cuts on his fingers... He rubbed them absentmindedly against the fabric of his pants, trying to remove the odd sensation he had felt in them. There had been the faintest feeling of a tug in the cuts, the ghost of a dragging sensation that he only got when activating his powers.

Whatever that stuff had been, it was bad news. And he didn't like it one single bit.

Checking out that warehouse was next on his priority list, that was for damn sure.

With stiff limbs, Tommy pushed to his feet, intent on making his way back home. He worked his way across the current rooftop, slipping his way between fire escapes and balconies, ledges and gutters with ease. Slowly, casually, he maneuvered back in the direction of Central, closer to where his apartment was located.

When he had first begun to do this a few months back, Tommy had been skittish, worrying that any second a hero would swoop down and drag him back to the Guild headquarters in a heartbeat. Now, he knew better.

No one bothered to come to Lower, much less gave a shit if a vigilante was running amuck in the streets.

Tommy took his time, pausing occasionally on a rooftop or hanging off the ladder of a fire escape, taking in the view of his city. The place was rather beautiful at night, in its own special way.

He stopped on one particular rooftop that overlooked a street full of smaller shops, some with quaint little awnings and stands that had been shuttered up for the night. Out in the open, Tommy sat himself balanced on the edge, enjoying the exhilarating little swoop in his stomach at the drop before him.

He was safe, here. No hero was coming for him, hunting him down. Hell, the Guild probably didn't even know he existed yet.

As far as Tommy was concerned, he was the opposite of a threat in their eyes. The press didn't even have a name for him yet, and shit- he didn't even have one for himself. His vigilante alias was most likely off the radar for every hero in the city. Well, every hero except-

"Yo! Red!"

Every hero except one.

Despite the unnecessarily loud call at this ungodly hour of the night, Tommy couldn't help but crack a smile at the familiar voice.

A glance behind him revealed the shape of the only super who bothered to show his face around here.

Ignition.

Known for his ability to detonate nearly any object with the touch of a hand, you'd think that the guy would've made a better villain than a hero. After all, it's a bit difficult to parade about as a good guy when you're born with a power that very easily lent itself to destruction.

But somehow, Ignition made it work.

Tommy rather liked that about him. Something about the man felt honest, earnest, despite the secret identity they both had. The hero had always seemed to want nothing but to protect, to serve proper justice to those who harmed others. And that was something Tommy could get behind.

“That’s not my fuckin’ name, you know,” Tommy replied, turning back around to gaze out over the empty street. “Just because my suit is cooler than yours doesn’t mean you ‘ave to make fun of it all the time.”

Footsteps crunched on the cement behind him. “Well until you figure out what the fuck your name is supposed to be, I’m sticking with Red.” There was a rustle of cloth as Ignition settled down beside him, feet hanging over the roof’s edge, trench coat pooling at his waist.

“It’s such a shit nickname, though,” Tommy groaned, tipping his head back. “You couldn’t have come up with something better?”

“You’ve been on the field for what- nearly five months now? If you still don’t have a name for yourself, then I’m not listening to anything you have to say, kid.”

Tommy’s nose scrunched up beneath his mask. That was rude and uncalled for, and in any other situation, he would’ve clobbered a hero for talking about him that way.

But this was Ignition, who had begun running into him just over two months ago. Ignition, who had complimented his fighting style and his shields, even when he was still a fresh, sloppy fighter. Ignition, who had been willing to give him pointers, who had even played backup when they ran into each other on patrol. The guy was the closest thing to a friend he had in this business, Honeybee and Enderwalk aside.

“How about this,” Ignition continued, “Why don’t we come up with something right here, right now. Put an end to this nonsense.”

“Alright,” Tommy said slowly, “Solid plan. Except for one thing.”

“And what’s that?”

“I have absolutely no fuckin’ clue what to choose.”

Ignition sighed, the sound leaning more toward fond than truly irritated. “Okay. That’s fine, we’ll work it out. First things first-” he turned to look at Tommy, brown eyes bright beneath his messy bangs. “What do you want your name to represent?”

“I want it to describe me, you know? Like, isn’t that the whole fucking point?”

“What about you do you want people to know? What stands out?”

Tommy glanced down at his hands, loose in his lap. “My discs, I guess. They’re half of what makes me as fuckin’ badass as I already am.”

The hero snorted at that, but played along. “Alright. So we’ve singled out your powers. Considering my own name, that’s a pretty decent start. Anything else?”

Tommy sat back on his palms, thinking. He wanted his name to mean something special, something that reflected what he stood for- who he was. Not just his powers, but why he did what he did, who he was when he put on the mask and suit.

Ignition sat silent, patiently waiting, letting him think it out. The hero began to hum, a low, soothing sound. Not a perfect one, but comforting nonetheless.

For some odd reason, as Tommy pondered the questions before him, his memories began to drift back to his earlier shift at the library. The boring, empty hours, silence so loud that he had to fill it himself.

And then that fuckin’ Wilbur guy showed up, all sass and swear words and stupid Greek textbooks that he had most definitely *not* flipped through out of curiosity once the guy left.

Suddenly, Tommy sat up straight, the memory bringing back some of the random bits of info he had absorbed when mindlessly flipping through the pages of that book, waiting for the clock to hit 8:00 so he could finally *leave* already.

“Aegis,” he blurted.

The humming stopped. “What?”

“Aegis,” he repeated, excited now. “That’s what my name should be.”

“Huh,” the hero tipped his head, seeming to consider the word. He nodded slowly. “I like it.”

“It means-”

“I know what it means,” he interrupted, not unkindly. The man smiled at him, no mask on his face to obscure it. “It suits you.”

Tommy preened. “Thanks.”

The smile on the man’s face grew into something more sinister. “I’m still gonna call you Red though.”

Tommy’s eyes must’ve shown every ounce of disbelief that he was currently feeling, because the hero promptly burst into giggles. The sound only devolved into a fit of mad, high cackles as Tommy swatted at him, trying to get the guy to shut up.

It didn’t work.

“Oh you fuckin’-“ In a last ditch attempt, he lunged at the hero, tackling him off the ledge and onto the roof proper. They scuffled about for a few seconds, shoving at each other and

laughing their asses off through curses and breathless jabs of misplaced elbows.

Eventually, Ignition pushed him off, and they both rolled onto their backs, out of breath but at ease.

“God, your elbows are so fucking *pointy*,” Ignition complained, rubbing at his ribcage.

“Suck it, bitch,” Tommy replied, still trying to catch his breath, both from the brief scrabble and the laughing fit he had just come out of.

Silence then took over the roof, both of them taking a moment to stew in tired silence. It was the good kind, though, the type that came after a long night out on patrol, an ache to the limbs that promised a job well done, an effort made.

Tommy blinked up at the stars currently fighting their way to be seen through the pollution of the city sky. He reached up and brushed the hair out of his eyes, tugging at his hood to lay more comfortably against the rooftop.

“It’s a nice night,” Ignition commented, voice softer than usual.

“Yeah,” Tommy replied. “It is.”

Chapter End Notes

Crime boys? Being besties before they become besties *again*? But of course.

Side note: I have been slowly listening my way through all of the Glass Animals albums in existence and I've since gotten myself addicted to their music. I heard Agnes for the first time today and quite literally sat there in shock and then promptly burst into tears. That song has crack in it, I swear. Y'all should go listen to it if that's your type of music and tell me if I'm insane or not, it's just so fucking pretty. UGH.

Anywho- hope you guys are having a good time, thanks for reading :)

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Bonding time with the Boys™

Chapter Notes

I have been feverishly writing this like all day. I got stuck for a while, then sat down today and boom, chapter. Maybe it's because I'm so desperate to get to the later scenes because I am obsessed with them and just want to get to the good stuff already.

Exposition? Disgusting. Hate it. The absolute worst.

But despite all my complaining, I really rather like the last scene. It's a good one, me thinks.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur came back.

It shouldn't have been as remarkable an instance as it was- this was a library. People tend to come and go from those. But this was the Lower Municipal. No one bothered to come here, much less *come back*. And the guy didn't even have books with him.

"Hey Tommy," he greeted, breezing in through the front doors. A chill entered with him, an unpleasant reminder of the winter outside that was beginning to make itself known. "Glad to see you here."

"I literally work here," Tommy deadpanned, feet up on the front desk, slouched in the uncomfortable wooden chair that came with it. "Like, every day."

Wilbur shrugged. "Didn't know that. It's nice to see you again, though. It's been a couple days."

"So?"

"So I came back. Duh."

"And you did that because...?"

A grin, inviting and yet keen at the same time. Tommy found himself enjoying it. “I was bored.”

Ah. There it was. An explanation.

Tommy leaned further back in his chair, pushing the front two legs off the ground. “Good to know I’m your newest source of entertainment, Big Man. Real flattering.”

“Oh shut up, child,” the man rolled his eyes, still smiling. “Says you. You did nothing but yell at me the last time I was here.”

“That was a few days ago, though,” Tommy countered, doing his best impression of a polite, well-mannered person. “I’m a changed man, Mr. Wilbur. Much kinder now.”

Wilbur laughed, shrugging off his coat, and Tommy couldn’t help but feel himself grin at the sound. Something about the guy just felt... *right*. Familiar. As if they already knew each other, as if they had done this back-and-forth insult bit a hundred times. He quickly brushed the feeling off, chalking it up to a misplaced sense of deja-vu and nothing else.

There was a crinkle of paper as Wilbur pulled a crumpled pastry bag from the depths of his coat, before discarding the clothing on the desk in a careless heap. Tommy eyed it with distaste, the already cluttered surface needing no further additions. But the smell of warm baked goods caught his attention first, and he decided to let it go. Did that make him a suck up? Possibly.

Was it worth it for the bagel that Wilbur was now holding out to him? Absolutely.

“Thought you might want a snack,” he said kindly, waiting for Tommy to take it. “There’s this really nice girl in Central- has this bakery. She makes the best- well, everything really.”

Tommy pulled his feet from the desk, leaning forward to snatch the bagel from Wilbur’s hands. It was still warm. He tore into it without hesitation.

And holy *shit* was it good.

It was an Everything bagel, and probably the best tasting thing Tommy had eaten in months. Hell- maybe years. “Is this drugs?” He choked out through a bite, “Cause I’m pretty sure there’s drugs in this, Big Dubs. And I’m a minor, so giving drugs to me makes you a fuckin’ wrongun.”

Wilbur stared blankly at him for a second, before bursting into a fit of giggles. “It’s not drugs, Tommy! It’s just a fucking bagel- what are you even on about?”

Tommy ignored the laughter, happily taking another bite. “Feel free to come back anytime, if you’re gonna keep bringing shit like this with you.”

The giggling died down, and Wilbur finally got a hold of himself. “You like it?” He asked, suddenly quieter, more sincere. As if he were shy or some shit. Huh.

Maybe this guy is just as terrible at making friends as I am, Tommy thought, cracking a smile. *Funny, innit?*

“Yeah, I do. It’s great. Thanks man.”

Wilbur positively beamed. “I’m glad.”

“You’re allowed to come back. I’ve decided. You’ve bribed your way into my heart with a deceptively delicious bagel.”

Wilbur snorted. “Good to know that all I needed was to feed you. What are you, a stray dog?”

Tommy popped the last bite of the bagel into his mouth. He pointed an accusing finger at the man, eyes narrowed. “I resent that.”

Wilbur just laughed. Tommy smiled.

He kept going back.

Nearly everyday, he found himself on the way to the library. Wilbur couldn’t help it. Somehow, in just about two weeks, Tommy had become his constant. The kid was always there. One step into the library doors, and he would be met by a grinning face and a slew of crude insults. And he loved it.

Tommy was funny, hilarious even. He had a sharp tongue, and an even sharper wit. Wilbur couldn’t help but play into it. They joked as Tommy shelved books, lounged about in-between the quiet isles, talking about anything and everything over a cup of Wilbur’s to-go coffee and a bagel or two. It was incredible.

If this was what having a friend was like, maybe he should’ve listened to Phil and Techno earlier.

And sure, he’d had Red before this. He rather liked Red- or well- Aegis now. The guy was funny, noble, and just a generally good person from what he could tell. Having that out in the field was something Wilbur saw as practically invaluable. But their partnership on the field had always had limits. Red’s secret identity had never been a thing of animosity between them, if anything, Wilbur understood the need to stay anonymous in a line of work as dangerous as theirs. But you could only get so close to a person under the cover of darkness, only allowed to see a single side of them.

But Tommy- Tommy was different. They didn’t have to hide anything from each other. Wilbur’s hero status hadn’t come up, either because Tommy didn’t realize or simply didn’t care. Either way, Wilbur was fine.

(And maybe he was the slightest bit worried- that maybe if it came up, Tommy would leave. Would resent him, somehow. But it never did, so it was fine.)

Everything else in his life was touched by his position as a hero. Not that that was a bad thing- he was proud of his status. It's just- it was nice to have moments outside of that. To exist in a different world with Tommy, if only for a little while.

But his want to escape, to hang out with Tommy and feel like he could *breathe* for the first time in ages was starting to catch up to him. He hadn't bothered to hide his sudden frequent trips out of the house, and his family had taken notice.

"You're leavin' again?"

Wilbur sighed, coming to a halt in the front entry, fingers hovering above his coat. He turned around to find Techno leaning against the back of the couch, arms crossed. "Yeah, I am. What's it to you?"

"Do you really need me to answer that, or are you playing dumb?" His brother grumbled, fixing him with a stare. "You've been in and out of the house like crazy, Wilbur. Phil and I are worried."

"When are you not?" Wilbur muttered under his breath.

Techno ignored him, eyes practically boring into his soul. "You haven't taken on a case that I don't know about, have you?"

"What? No!" Wilbur protested, stiffening. "It's not that at all."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes!"

"Then what is it?" Techno shot back. "Because you've spent however long holed up in your room, and now you're vanishin' every other day to who knows where. I asked Phil, he doesn't know either."

"Why the hell do you care?"

"Because I care about you!" Techno snapped. "And I know I keep pushin' all the time, I just-" he sighed. "I worry too much. I just want you to be okay, Wilbur. You know that."

Wilbur softened. "I get that, Tech, I do. But I'm fine." Techno's frown didn't lessen. "Really, I am. Better than ever, honestly," he reassured, trying to convince him. "I'm not taking on hero work- no more than usual, anyway. I've taken your advice, actually. You'd be proud."

Confusion took over Techno's stern expression. "My advice?"

"You know, to socialize more. Talk to people. That sort of thing."

His brother's face went blank, and Wilbur could practically hear the gears turning. Techno's face suddenly scrunched up, the look of someone who had thought of something awfully unpleasant and was hating every second of it. He hesitated. "...Is there a girl?"

Wilbur's jaw hit the floor. "Is there a *what*?"

Techno threw his hands up. Both of their faces quickly became a matching shade of red. "I dunno! You said it's not hero business, and that you've been talkin' to people, and you haven't said anythin' about it! What else was I supposed to think?"

"Oh, I don't know!" Wilbur screeched, "How about literally *anything* else?!"

Arms crossed, Techno moved around to the front of the couch, falling into it. He looked for all the world like a petulant child. "Sorry," he mumbled. His eyes skirted away, the awkward energy in the room very strong. Wilbur, like the loving, wonderful person he was, decided to take pity on his brother.

The heat slowly leeches from his face, and he sighed. "I've been visiting a friend, if you must know."

Techno looked back at him, then blinked a few times. He snorted, shaking his head and chuckling under his breath. "Okay, yeah. Sure."

Wilbur bristled at that. "What the hell does that mean? It's the truth."

The smile on Techno's face was a small one, barely showing teeth. Wilbur watched, incredulous, as his brother's face twitched, obviously trying very hard to keep it that way. "Wilbur, with all due respect," he fought back a laugh. "You meetin' up with a girl is more likely than you havin' an actual friend."

"Oh fuck you, Technoblade--"

"I'm just *sayin'* --"

"No- you know what," Wilbur said, planting his hands on his hips. There was a nasty sense of determination running through him. He was sick of the teasing, the stupid looks. Wilbur could make friends. Look at Tommy! They were practically brothers at this point.

Wilbur's eyes narrowed, and he began to scheme. There was only one way out of this, one way to prove what he was saying: he was going to bring Tommy home and introduce him to the family. Simple. Easy.

The library was a bland place to hang out, anyway, Wilbur reasoned. One could only do so much with rickety bookshelves and even more rickety chairs. Why not shake it up? Tommy would agree in a heart beat, anyway. He was sure of it. He smiled to himself, imagining the kid's face lighting up at the invitation to a mug full of hot chocolate and a movie.

"...Wilbur? Hello?"

"Huh?"

Techno raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. “You were sayin’ something. I think.”

“Oh! Yes,” he straightened up, a glint in his eye. “If you don’t believe me, that’s fine,” Techno opened his mouth to protest, but Wilbur cut him off. “Ah ah- I don’t need to hear it. I’ll bring him back here, and then you’ll see.”

Techno just shook his head, faintly amused. “Whatever you say, Wil. I’m sure that’ll work out.”

Wilbur threw on his coat. “You’ll see, Techno,” he declared, yanking open the front door with far too much enthusiasm. There was nothing that could stop him now. Wilbur Soot was a man on a mission. Wilbur Soot was not going to take this slander any longer. He glanced over his shoulder, Techno just catching a glimpse of the determined look in his eye, the smirk on his face. “You’ll see.”

This was going to be easy as hell.

“No.”

Wilbur spluttered. “What do you mean, *no*?”

“I mean no, Wil, I’m not coming over to your house just to prove to your brother that you can make friends.”

“Why not?” Wilbur whined, following Tommy as he slowly pushed a cart through the Non-fiction section, one of the wheels squeaking the whole way.

“Because.” Tommy scanned the titles, searching for a spot in the ‘Ha’ section of authors. He picked up a book and shoved it into place. “I’m fuckin’ tired, man. I don’t want to deal with that right now.”

It was true. Ever since the encounter with the odd vial in that alleyway, Tommy had been out on the streets every night, trying to get a chance to investigate that warehouse the guy had mentioned. But every time he decided to take the trek out to the abandoned industrial section of Lower, he got pulled into other situations first.

And as important as he knew investigating that substance was, Tommy would never turn away from someone in need, even if it meant postponing the investigation for a little while longer. Needless to say, he was frustrated, tired, and a little bit off his a-game from wandering far out of his usual territory every night, and yet still had nothing to show for it.

Aside from the deep circles under his eyes and a fresh set of bruises, that is.

“They’re really nice, I swear,” Wilbur pressed, trying to convince him. “I mean Techno’s a bit of an asshole sometimes, but that’s just cause he’s shit at emotions. And Phil’s the best- you’d love him.”

“Yes, Wil, I know that,” Tommy replied, pausing to lean down on the shaky little cart to subtly catch his breath. Shit, his ribs hurt. Stupid criminals with stupid feet that kick you when you’re down. “But *I* am fucking tired. And I still have like an hour left of my shift. No.”

Wilbur groaned dramatically. Tommy paid him no mind, continuing on through the shelves with the tinny shriek of metal. Footsteps followed behind. “Tommy. Toms. Please. Please, Tommy. I need you.”

“Oh my god Wil. Shut up, you clingy bastard,” Tommy groaned, turning to smack the man in the chest with the book in his hands. “You’re annoying as fuck. I’m trying to work here, man.”

He turned away, lugging his cart with him. Wilbur, the bitch that he was, grabbed the other end of the rickety thing, pulling on it. Tommy gave him a halfhearted glare over the top of it.

“Let go, dickhead.”

“No. Pay attention to me.”

Tommy tugged at the cart. Wilbur tugged back. Tommy leaned back on his heels and *yanked*.

Good news, Tommy was now back in possession of the cart. Bad news, the cart, the books, and Tommy himself all went flying.

Oh- Christ, that smarts.

Tommy groaned, blinking blearily up at the ceiling. *Ow*.

“Holy shit, Tommy- are you okay?”

He turned his head to blink owlishly at Wilbur, who was crouched next to him with a panicked look on his face. “I’m great, Big Dubs, just a little tumble is all.” He let out a chuckle, the sound a bit strained as the bruises on his abdomen and chest throbbed. When he tried to sit up, Wilbur held him down with one hand.

“I wasn’t talking about the fall,” his friend said grimly, looking down at Tommy’s front. The teasing air had left his tone, face set and serious. “Tommy, what-“

Tommy craned his neck and glanced down, breath catching in his throat. His sweatshirt had ridden up, the very edge of some of the bruising peeking out. *Shit*.

Wilbur slowly reached out and pulled up the hem of Tommy’s shirt further. His jaw clenched at what was revealed, gaze steely. “What the fuck is this?”

Tommy swallowed hard. He liked Wilbur, he really did. The guy was great- kind, a bit clingy at times, but they got on like a dumpster on fire. (Okay, perhaps not the best metaphor, but whatever.) Needless to say, he loved being friends with Wil.

But there was no way in hell he was going to be able to tell the truth about this.

“Tommy.”

Think fast think fast uh-

“I- I got beat up?” He cringed. *Oh, that was terrible. Nice one, Tommy. He’s going to see right through that.*

But to his surprise, Wilbur didn’t even question it, just grit his teeth and let go of Tommy’s shirt. “Who?”

“...Huh?”

“Who?” Wilbur repeated, voice low. “Who did it?”

Tommy pushed his palms against the floor, going to sit up. Wilbur let him. “Um, I dunno. It was dark. Couldn’t see very well. Why? It’s not like you can do anything about it.”

Wilbur laughed at that, but the sound was empty. Humorless. “Good one.”

“I’m serious.”

“Trust me, Tommy. I’d do something about it.”

Tommy snorted. “Uh-huh. You? Sure thing, Wil.”

There was no response. Wilbur just stared at him, silent. Tommy stared back. Some of the contempt on his friend’s face had faded, replaced by bewilderment. “Have you seriously not figured it out by now?” Wilbur said slowly, quiet and unsure. “I thought maybe you just didn’t care, but-“

Now it was Tommy’s turn to be confused. “Figured out what? What are you talking about?”

Wilbur smiled at him, but it looked far too apologetic. It was as if he were preparing to lose something. “I’m a hero, Tommy. Ignition, to be exact. Did you really not know?”

And with that one word, Tommy had never felt like more of an idiot in his entire life.

Of course Wilbur was Ignition. *Of course.* How the fuck did he not realize?

It’s not like Ignition’s identity was a secret. The hero didn’t even wear a mask, for god’s sake. He attended public press conferences all the time, broadcasted his face across the internet. And sure, Tommy had hung out with the guy dozens of times, but it was always under the cover of darkness, during fights. That was his excuse, anyway.

Holy hell.

He sat there, gaping at Wilbur, whose face had completely fallen by now. Tommy was completely lost for words.

Here was the man who was not just his closest and only friend, but the hero who had taken Aegis under the wing, had taught him to fight. Who had kept him alive, made a point to seek him out on the streets, to check up on him. Wilbur, his best friend, who brought him bagels and bright smiles, helped him put away books and did a piss poor job of it. Ignition, the hero who had had Tommy's respect from the very beginning.

His best friend. His mentor, of sorts. One and the same.

What the shit.

"I- sorry," Wilbur murmured, pulling away. "I didn't realize- I can go. I didn't mean to upset you, or anything. I know not everyone is fond of heroes, I just..."

Tommy snapped out of it, catching Wilbur's arm before he could leave. "Wil, wait- stop moving, you dumbass. I'm not mad."

Wilbur froze. "You- You're not?"

"No! Of course not," Tommy gave his friend's arm a squeeze, before letting go and running a hand through his hair. He let out a laugh, the slightest bit too delirious for his liking.

"Surprised, sure. Kicking myself for not having figured it out earlier, definitely." He met Wilbur's eyes and the blossoming hope in them. "But I'm not mad."

Wilbur let out a breath, slumping in relief. "Thank fuck," he exhaled, shaking his head. "You went quiet for so long, I thought you were absolutely pissed at me."

"Well that's fuckin' stupid of you," Tommy grumbled good-naturedly, reaching out to push at his friend's shoulder. "We're friends, aren't we? I'm not gonna get upset at you just for being a hero."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Wilbur said with a touch of bitterness. "You'd be surprised by how many people don't trust a hero like me."

Tommy bit back a laugh. *Probably less surprised than you think.*

"Don't worry about me, Big Dubs. I'm not gonna leave you over something stupid like that. You're stuck with me."

Wilbur laughed. "Am I now?"

"Yup," Tommy crowed. "Forever and ever. Amen."

"You're ridiculous," Wilbur scoffed, shaking his head. The smile on his face grew faint. "Are you sure you're alright?" He questioned again, unable to let it go. "Your bruises, me being a hero, just- everything?"

“Mhm.”

“You sure? You trust me?”

Tommy smacked him. “Yes, already! Stop being an insecure little bitch, Wil. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Wilbur breathed, nodding, obviously relieved. “Okay.”

Tommy felt the same way. They were good- his friend was worried about him, but didn’t push. Tommy didn’t hate Wilbur’s guts, as much as his friend had expected him to, for some reason. It was okay.

Then a nasty thought occurred to him, and Tommy’s heart sank. Trust. Wilbur had been so vulnerable, worried that Tommy wouldn’t trust him anymore simply because he was a hero. And here Tommy was, now realizing that he would have to hide himself from both parts of Wilbur.

That- that sucked. Big time.

Guilt already festering in his gut, Tommy smiled weakly at Wilbur, who returned the expression easily. There wasn’t much he could do about any of that nasty business. But he did know one way to make Wilbur happier, to do something to slightly make up for betraying his trust. “How about this? Help me pick up these books we spilt, the you can drag me to your fuckin’ fancy ass house in Central. I’ll even let you give me an icepack for the bruises. Deal?”

Wilbur brightened, getting to his feet and reaching out a hand to help him up. “Deal.”

Tommy took it.

As they cleaned up the fallen books, he came to a decision. Or, more of a realization, really. They had a good thing going, the two of them. Getting to hang out with Wilbur, both as civilians and in costume, had been the best thing to happen to him in a long, long time.

Tommy wasn’t going to fuck it up. Wilbur deserved better than that.

If it came to it- maybe he could let his identity slip, just once. If was between potentially getting arrested, getting in trouble, whatever it may be- and hurting Wilbur? Well.

He’d chose to save Wilbur, every time.

Chapter End Notes

Lonely Crimeboys who are garbage at communication and are already protective of each other after knowing the other for only like two weeks? Good soup.

(that sound has been playing in my brain on repeat please someone make it stop)

Sorry for the longer wait, I know I said it would be this long between updates at the start but still. I cannot believe it's nearly been two weeks. Aaannnd it has *just* occurred to me that I have to go back to school next week. I hate it here.

Hope you guys are all doing well! :)

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Some more fluff before the real stuff begins

Chapter Notes

I'm gonna keep this short, this is a double update. I was gonna have it be one chapter but some consideration has made me realize it's better off split.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Technoblade took one look at Tommy and began to laugh.

The teen in question bristled, obviously already on edge. Wilbur sighed, eyes raised to the heavens. He set a reassuring hand on Tommy's shoulder, giving it a squeeze before taking a deep, calming breath. "What's so funny, Techno?"

Techno's chuckles died down, the book he had been reading when they came through the front door set down in his lap. The amusement still lingered on his brother's face as he leveled Wilbur with a look. "*That's* your friend?"

Tommy stiffened further under Wilbur's hand. "Yeah, bitch. And what about it?" The kid spat, glaring.

The affronted response seemed to catch Techno off guard, his brother's eyes widening in surprise. He held up his hands. "Nothing, absolutely nothing, just-" A smirk formed on his lips. "How much did Wilbur pay you to be here, really?"

"Alright, you dick, that's enough!" Wilbur snapped, yanking off his coat and launching it at Techno. It hit him square in the face, but the wheezing chuckles could still be heard coming out of it. Wilbur glared at the lump, contemplating finding something more painful to do to his brother.

Way to make a good first impression, you bastard.

There was a moment of contemplative silence as Wilbur seethed, face flushed with embarrassment. Tommy hummed beside him, cocking his head to the side. There was a slow-forming smile on his face, the earlier anger gone.

“I like him,” the teen decided.

Wilbur wanted to cry.

Wilbur’s house was rather nice, Tommy thought. It was the epitome of domestic: cozy, filled with useless sentimental junk. Pictures of Wil, Techno, and a blonde man Wilbur introduced as his dad Phil, covered the walls. None of them were of the two brothers as young children, though, which he found a bit odd. They all started when the boys were very young teens, by the looks of it.

“We’re adopted.”

Tommy startled, turning around to see Techno hovering over his shoulder, a kind look on his face. The man nodded at the picture Tommy was looking at, a sweet image of Phil with a young Wilbur hanging off of his arm, Techno pulling on his shoulders from behind. They were all laughing, eyes and faces lit up like the sun. Tommy couldn’t help but ache a little at the sight, a misplaced sense of jealousy in his gut that he felt guilty for having in the first place.

“Oh,” he murmured, looking at the wall. “Makes sense, I guess. You really are nothing alike.”

Techno laughed. For such a stern looking guy, he really did find humor in everything. Tommy rather liked that about him. “What gave it away? The pink hair or the height difference?”

“The lack of shitty attitude, actually.”

“I heard that!” called Wilbur, head poking out of the kitchen with a scowl. “Little prick.”

“See,” Tommy said, exasperated. “He’s proving my point.”

Techno glanced between the two of them, Tommy with his arms crossed, chin stuck out in defiance and Wilbur, emerging from the kitchen with three steaming mugs balanced precariously in his hands and a bag of frozen peas under his arm. “I see why you’re friends.”

Tommy paused, trying to think of a response to that, but nothing came. It was simply an honest observation, and one that made his heart swell in his chest. Wilbur successfully navigated to the living room without making a mess, gingerly setting the mugs on the coffee table, as well as the vegetables. Tommy perked up, the smell of hot chocolate capturing his attention.

“Ooh, gimme one of those-“

He scrambled over, snatching a mug despite Wilbur’s protests.

“Toms wait, it’s really-“

The drink immediately burnt his tongue, searing his mouth as his tongue went numb. He swallowed quickly, cursing.

“...Hot.” Wilbur finished lamely.

“Fuck, that hurt,” he whined, chewing at his tongue, trying to get the feeling back into his mouth.

“No shit, dumbass,” Wilbur replied, taking the mug from his hands. “I was trying to warn you, but I should’ve remembered that you have no patience.” Tommy pouted, sadly unable to deny that one. “I made one for you too, Tech,” Wilbur called over his shoulder. “If you want it.”

“I’ll chug it before I go out for patrol,” Techno replied, disappearing down the hall to where Wilbur had said the bedrooms were. Wilbur nodded, satisfied. He picked up the bag of peas and tossed them to Tommy, who slipped them under his sweatshirt to curb the residual ache of the bruises.

“Patrol?” Tommy asked, slightly confused. “Why does he have a patrol?” *What, was Techno a hero too?* He resisted the urge to laugh. *Imagine.*

Wilbur stopped moving for a second, as if he had finally realized what Techno had just said. He grimaced. “Ah, about that, Tommy. I’m not, uh- I’m not the only hero in my family actually.” His friend rubbed nervously at the back of his neck. “You just met Revenant, believe it or not.”

And oh, what the actual fuck.

Tommy’s jaw hit the floor. “Revenant?” he squeaked, incredulous. “Your literature nerd brother is fucking *Revenant*?”

“Yes?” Wilbur cringed, looking a bit sheepish.

“Okay, you know what? Sure,” Tommy scoffed, rolling his eyes in disbelief. He fell into the couch, careful not to disturb the hot chocolates sitting on the table in front of them. “Techno is a hero. What next? You’re gonna tell me your dad is the fuckin’ Rook or some shit?”

Wilbur stayed silent. Tommy glanced at his friend, who looked apologetic, of all things.

There’s no way-

Tommy gaped. “You’re kidding.”

“Sorry?”

“No-“ Tommy sat up, eyes wide as saucers. He pointed an accusing finger in Wilbur’s direction. “*No.* You’re fucking with me, right Wil? You’ve gotta be.”

Wilbur shook his head, sitting down as well. "I'm not, Tommy."

"I- *huh?*"

If Wil was being serious, which he seemed to be, then that meant Tommy was currently sitting in the living room of three of the most well-known heroes in the entire city. Not only was that incredibly cool, but also incredibly terrifying, considering he was also an illegal vigilante who only personally trusted one of those three heroes.

Revenant, the top hero in the entire city. Praised for his fighting skills and known for his incredible powers. The guy- well, *Techno* apparently, had light-speed self-healing powers that practically made him immortal. The powers had their limits, of course. Behead him, trap him underwater for longer than his body could keep up with, take off his limbs, then there'd be an issue. But to your everyday gunshot and stab wounds? Revenant was invincible.

And the Rook? Holy shit- the *Rook*. The hero had been at the top back at his peak, but had been overtaken by Revenant when the other hero appeared on the field. Not to discount the Rook though- the guy was still a formidable force. With summonable wings that seemed to be made of the shadows themselves, the guy could not only fly, but fight and shield himself with the appendages, not unlike Tommy's discs.

Needless to say, learning that the heroes were literally Wil's fucking *brother* and *dad* was a massive shock.

"What the absolute fuck," Tommy whispered, staring forlornly at the forgotten hot chocolates.

"Sorry," Wil repeated, sounding genuine about it. "I know it's a lot. I probably should've told you before, but," he chuckled weakly. "Then again, you only found out about me being Ignition a couple hours back, so."

"I cannot believe this," Tommy muttered, leaning back into the couch. "So what- all three of you guys are heroes, and just nobody knows that you're family?"

"Pretty much," Wilbur shrugged, giving back the now sufficiently cooled mug of cocoa. "It's for safety purposes, and all that. Helps that Tech and I patrol at different times, and in totally different areas. Phil is mostly called out for major events these days, spends most of his time dealing with paperwork and technical shit up at the Guild instead. Helps keep the media off our backs."

"Huh," Tommy muttered, taking it all in. "So what, you three just never see each other?"

Wilbur's eyes grew sad, a touch of bitterness to his smile. "Something like that."

"Damn, that sucks."

Wilbur burst into shocked laughter, all bitterness forgotten at the deadpanned comment. "Yep," he choked out. "That's one way to put it."

Tommy brought his mug up to his lips, contemplating. He thought about the little sting of jealousy that had hit him before, looking at the photos. From the outside, Wil's life seemed to be everything he wanted- a hero, able to help people, to be well known and respected. All with a caring family at home and the perfect place in Central. But once again, it seemed the two of them had more in common than they'd initially realized.

Funny how that works, innit?

"You wanna watch a movie, Toms?" Wilbur interrupted his thoughts, grabbing the tv remote and a blanket off the back of the couch before settling in.

Tommy thought about it. It was already kind of late, and if he wanted to get to patrol tonight, he should probably be leaving soon. But then again, he was sore, and tired. And he had just gotten to Wil's house, and if the warehouse investigation had waited this long, it could probably wait one more night.

"Fine. But I get to chose."

"Why?" Wilbur complained even as he handed Tommy the remote. "I don't want to have to watch some stupid children's movie."

"I'm not a child, you dick," Tommy countered, grumbling. "And it's reparation for emotional damages."

Wilbur didn't say anything, just heaved a sigh and tucked the blanket around them as *Up* was cued onto the screen.

I can't believe I didn't know you before, Wilbur wondered, looking down at the sleepy teenager currently flopped against his side. *How the hell did I manage?*

The movie was coming to a close, and the two were leaning into one another on the couch, long-empty mugs of hot cocoa discarded on the coffee table. A hand repeatedly worked its way through Tommy's hair as Wilbur thought.

And perhaps he hadn't known Toms for an incredibly long time, but as they sat there together, one thought- one impression- stuck to Wilbur, a proverbial fly to paper.

Tommy was *good*.

Annoying as shit, chaotic as fuck, but *good*.

There was a passion for others residing inside the kid that left Wilbur baffled at the best of times. A sort of loyalty toward humanity itself, for the people of his neighborhood, the

random passerby on the street who were struggling to get by just as much as Tommy was. The kid was simply remarkable in that way.

His district was run-down, ignored, thrown under the rug and wasting away, and yet Wilbur found that despite everything, Tommy cared. He told stories about helping his neighbors when the power inevitably went out, worked hard at his job, no matter how dull the shift, and smiled extra wide at anyone who seemed to be having a bad day as they passed on the sidewalk, positively beaming when a watery one was returned. And he did it all without reservation, a quirk to his lips and a curse not far behind.

That's just the way Tommy was, Wilbur realized with an ounce of awe as the movie credits rolled by on the TV.

A light in the darkness, a spark of hope in this shithole of life that everyone had to navigate, and each day Wilbur couldn't help but lament that fact that he had gone so long without knowing it.

And now that he did, Wilbur was never going to let it go.

"For fuck's sake Wil- get off--"

Figuratively, or literally.

"Seriously man," Tommy grumbled, still a little drowsy, pushing at his arm half-heartedly. "I gotta go home. Enough of the clingy shit."

"No," Wilbur tightened his grip on the teen, curling around him. "I don't want to get up."

"Don't care. Move, bitch."

"Stay," Wilbur said impulsively, tightening his hold. He didn't want to lose this, not just yet. "Don't go home."

Tommy stopped pushing at him, escape attempts ceasing for the the moment. "What?"

"Stay here. I'll lend you some clothes or something, I don't know. Just--" Wilbur got quiet, realizing maybe he had overstepped, had made Tommy uncomfortable. "Don't leave yet."

Lifting his head from Tommy's hair, Wilbur could clearly see the conflict swimming in his friend's eyes, the blurred line between want and need, the debate between could and should making things difficult. But eventually, the turmoil calmed, and Tommy nodded. "Alright," he said. "But just this once."

"Just this once," Wilbur agreed, already getting up to get Tommy something to sleep in. "Promise."

And even though he was never the type to break a promise, Wilbur couldn't help but wish that maybe, this time he would.

They ended up passed out on the couch, tangled in a single blanket, snoring.

And if Techno laughed and snapped a quick picture when he came back from patrol, well. Nobody needed to know.

Chapter End Notes

Hope y'all like that, and I know I've said it a million times but I freaking love Crime Boys. So much. Gah. <3

Anyway I'm gonna post this and run to put up the second update because it's my favorite part so far and I'm way too excited about it

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

PLOT TIME BITCHES

Chapter Notes

Okay hi am I very excited for this chapter. It got way longer than I meant it to, but I don't care. I doubt you guys are complaining anyway. But look! We've finally gotten into the plot. It's here.

Things start to get wild from here on out, so buckle your damn seatbelts, people.

Here we go.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tonight was the night.

No more excuses, no more stops. The Lower district would have to survive without him, just this once. Tommy had been waiting long enough as it was to investigate the warehouse, and there wasn't a better time than now.

Staying at Wil's last night had been nice, he had to admit. That was the best rest he had gotten in ages- hell, probably in years. So why not use that energy to scope out a warehouse potentially producing some very sketchy drugs? It was a brilliant plan, if you asked him.

Peeling off the sweatshirt of Wil's that he had borrowed and worn home (it was comfy, okay?), Tommy slipped on his gear just as the sun dipped below the horizon, bathing the city in hazy gold and quick growing shadows.

The sooner he set out, the better.

Taking the usual route out the living room window, Tommy moved to the rooftops, once again resuming the mantle of Aegis. And damn, did it feel good. Even one night off duty, and he had already been itching to get back out there. The breeze whipped the edges of his hood, snagging at his legs as he jogged, boots pounding against the rooftops. One leap, a brief second of weightlessness, and an alleyway was cleared. A bright grin hid under his mask, power coursing under his skin, discs just waiting to make an appearance.

It took a while to make it to the rotting industrial sector. Darkness had properly set in, the abandoned wasteland of factories, loading bays, and warehouses looming and eerie in the uncomfortably quiet nighttime air. Even in the most rundown residential parts of Lower there was sound: doors slamming, the crackling buzz of streetlights, the coughing of an air-conditioning unit on its last leg.

Here, it was dead. Nothing but the distant clanging of metal and puttering of car engines, accompanied by the sour smell of rust and exhaust.

Not a very pleasant place to be.

The buildings here were too far apart, their roofs too untrustworthy to be traversed. Tommy reluctantly made his way to the ground, finding a home in the shadows of the gaping, empty buildings. His boots crunched on gravel, moving from street to street, looking for the neon sign the alleyway man had mentioned.

He found it. Granted, there was no light coming from it, and the letters were so smashed that it was illegible, but still. A decent enough landmark. Although, as Tommy tucked himself into a blocked-off side entrance to the warehouse, he supposed it wouldn't have been hard to single the building out anyway.

It was the only place that still had people in it.

Or more specifically, a van being unloaded in a nearby truck bay under the cover of near darkness, only a few struggling lights to illuminate the scene. Tommy watched with sharp eyes as two people hauled a large box from the vehicle and carried inside, the bay door sliding shut behind them with a clatter of metal shutters. A few more stood guard outside, stiff and vigilant. Probably supers, sent to guard whatever this delivery was.

Interesting.

Well, one thing was for sure- there was something going on here, and Tommy wasn't leaving until he found out exactly what it was.

Getting inside wasn't too difficult.

He wandered around the perimeter of the building, keeping an ear and an eye out for any potential threats. Most likely, whatever operation was taking place inside was only using a section of the building. After all, the place was massive, and getting away with illegal shit was always easier when you kept it to a small, local scale. Tommy would know.

Then, it was simply a matter of deciding a doorway looked unused enough, summoning one of his discs, and bodily slamming into said door while praying to god that no one was on the

other side. It appeared luck was on his side tonight, thankfully. This section of the building was empty, abandoned. Safe- for now.

Tommy quickly dissolved the shields, not wanting their red glow to give him away. He then crept through the warehouse, ducking behind dusty steel shelves and molding cardboard boxes, internally thanking Honeybee for the filter in his mask the whole way. His boot was creeping into the next isle of shelving when a bank of lights flicked on at the far end of the building, a door slamming shut.

He froze as the sound echoed through the building, holding entirely still.

It would be naive of him to expect to get through this mission without running into *someone*, but still. A guy could hope.

A voice floated above the looming shelves. "...by the rest of them. We're just delivering, the other shift does the assembly."

There was grunt, then the thump and scrape of a container across the concrete floor as something was set down. Slowly, silently, Tommy moved forward, footsteps light and agile, keeping his back to the shelving.

"Can't believe the price of all this shit. No idea what those scientist folks are using it for." A different voice replied, slightly out of breath. "I thought they'd be done ordering things after that first batch."

Tommy halted.

First batch. If they were speaking about what he thought they were...

"Eh, isn't any of my business. Who cares what they do with all this test tube crap? Not me." The voices started to fade, footsteps carrying them away. "I'm just here for the paycheck."

Well, that just about confirms the suspicions, Tommy thought, picking up the pace. *This is home base, baby.*

He jogged toward the light, wanting to snoop around before those two came back, if they were coming back at all. He reached the edge of the old shelving right as the lights turned back off, a loud click followed by everything being cast into darkness. Uneasily, Tommy took a step out of the shelter of the shelves and out into the open, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Before him lay an area much different from the rest of the warehouse. For one, the old shelves and boxes had been uprooted and cleared away, leaving space for cluttered work tables, piled with papers, fancy electronic equipment he had no fucking clue as to what it was, beakers, bottles of mystery shit, whatever. Red and green LEDs blinked back at him, the screens of various pieces of technology casting enough light to make out shapes through the pressing gloom.

A cold feeling settled in his gut.

Tommy traversed through the tables, careful not to trip on the cables criss-crossing the floor. Curious, he swiped a couple documents from a workstation, holding them up and squinting at the words, trying to decipher them. It was useless. Too dark, too complicated, too time consuming. He tossed them back and moved on, trying not to get jittery.

Something about this place just felt- *odd*. Sinister. Too clean and professional, too expensive for this shithole sector. It put him on edge, goosebumps prickling the back of his neck beneath the hood of his suit. He scanned the area, peering through the gloom for anything of interest, anything that could give him some decent answers as to just what the actual hell was going on here.

His eyes alighted on a small structure a few tables away, a cube constructed of opaque plastic. Whatever was in there, it was obviously important enough to need its own separate room. Maybe the cube had some answers for him.

Tommy made his way over.

He circled it, searching for a way in, not wanting to just tear the thing down and risk setting something off. On the far side was a slit in the plastic, not unlike the flap of a tent. Slowly, he reached out and pulled the plastic aside, entering the small space.

“Holy shit,” Tommy breathed, eyes wide.

The general gloom of the warehouse was lesser here, eaten away by a milky white luminescence. Laid out in rows on a single table were cases of vials identical to the one he had seen in the alleyway. But this time there were dozens of them, pristine glass and metal caps glinting in the dull light of their own glow. He crept forward, hands hovering over them, unsure.

Tommy chewed at his lip, brow furrowed. Would it be a good idea to take one? Maybe bring it to Ignition or the other heroes, have them run some tests?

He scanned over the vials, obviously the product of the machines and workspaces outside. Before he could make up his mind on stealing one, though, something else caught his eye. On the far end of the table was another case of vials, but these were different.

They had color.

One a deep, rich violet. A few that were a bright, lovely shade of gold. Many more that were violent shade of neon green, almost painful to look at in the low light. And finally, a jet black, swirling with hues of navy and purple. Beside them sat a box of hypodermic needles that made his skin crawl uncomfortably.

Cautiously, Tommy rounded the table, intending to take a closer look when his attention was diverted from the substances for a second time.

There was a stack of glossy photos wedged under the corner of the container of the colored drugs. Morbidly curious, Tommy carefully slipped them out from underneath it, holding his

breath as the tubes clinked inside. When they settled without incident, he let himself relax, huffing out a shaky breath.

Pull yourself together, Tommy, he scolded himself. Stop freaking out about everything- this is just a routine mission. He took a steadying breath. *Calm.*

But that self assurance proved useless as he looked down at the pictures in his hands. He stiffened, muscles tense as his heart leapt into his throat.

That was- what the *hell*?

The front was a picture of Enderwalk. It was a bit blurry, obviously taken under the cover of darkness and mid-teleport, but the swirl of purple particles was unmistakable. Tommy knew from experience that Ender tried to stay under the radar, out of the public eye as much as possible. The fact that the picture existed at all was disturbing. He flipped the image over to see if there was any sort of explanation as to what the fuck a picture of his friend was doing here. The back was empty aside from two sloppy words.

Trace successful.

Whatever that meant, he fucking hated the sound of it.

Feeling sick, Tommy rapidly shuffled through the stack, nausea growing greater with each image. Behind the one of Enderwalk was one of the Rook, a picture from behind with his wings splayed wide, an identical “Trace successful” written on the back. The same went for the picture of Ignition mid-detonation, which freaked him out even more.

But there were other photos there too, although lacking any inscription. Honeybee. Revenant. Other heroes, other vigilantes, all with powers on full display.

And-

Him. Aegis, standing in an alleyway, shields up, illuminating his mask, the rest of his face thankfully obscured by his hood.

The photos dropped from his hands as if they’d burnt him, scattering across the floor. Tommy staggered back, hand clutching at his chest as his heart tried to beat right out of it.

“What the fuck,” he whispered, horrified. “What the *fuck*-“

This wasn’t some random mad scientist bullshit, or some person who mixed a few too many chemicals together. This was someone who knew exactly what they were after, *who* they were after- and by the looks of it, they knew exactly how to get it.

And he was standing in the middle of it all.

And so- despite having been in situations far more dangerous than this one, Tommy panicked.

He should've known better, *did* know better, but this whole situation felt so many levels of *wrong* and his picture was on the floor, *Wilbur's* picture was on the floor and he- shit, he had to get out of here-

He tore his way out of the plastic cube, half out of his mind but still with it enough to remember to keep low, to attempt leave without a trace. Tommy scrambled, fleeing through the unfamiliar dark, trying to go back to where he came from.

But this was a cluttered workspace, and the vigilante was running, and it seemed his earlier luck had run out.

His foot caught on one of the many electrical cables snaking across the floor and he tripped, the weight of his fall ripping a piece of equipment from its place on a worktable. The thing tipped through the air, finally landing on the concrete floor with what felt like an ear-splitting crash of metal and the crunch of plastic.

"Fuck!" Tommy hissed, pushing onto his knees, desperately untangling the cord from around his boot, heart pounding in his ears. Across the sea of tables, a door slammed open. Cursing under his breath, he unhooked the cable, jumping to his feet.

There was a loud click followed by the buzz of electricity as the fluorescent lights flicked on overhead. Rapid footsteps followed. Tommy stood out like sore thumb among the equipment and tables, and he damn well knew it. He'd be spotted instantly.

"Over here!" A voice shouted, and Tommy braced his feet, summoning his discs and trying to take comfort in the familiar red glow.

In an amount of time far shorter than it should've been, someone was upon him, darting forward with inhuman speed and raining blows. Tommy gasped, bracing the shields out in front of him as he backpedaled down the row of workstations, trying to escape. He attempted to swipe out with a foot, catch their jaw with a shield, *anything*, but it proved a fruitless exercise, the attacker moving with enhanced grace and speed.

They're powered, Tommy thought, turning and leaping onto a table in an effort to get away, landing in a separate row. *Fuck*.

Then there were gunshots.

Tommy yelped, crouching and ducking behind the discs, flinching as bullets buried themselves into the equipment behind him, one slamming into his right shield with a loud *crack*. He grimaced as spiderwebs formed on its surface.

"That's fuckin' cheating, you bastard!" He shouted into the air, panting, ducking beneath another table. He doubled back toward the cube, trying to shake the person on his tail.

"Shouldn't have broken in, you little shit!" A voice responded from the direction of the gunfire. Another pot-shot volley of gunfire followed.

Tommy kept his wits about him despite the panic still making things a little shaky, falling into the muscle memory of a fight. *Don't get caught, deflect the blows, keep moving.* Approaching footsteps got louder and he rolled under a table to hide in the shadows, tucking himself between various boxes. He stifled his breath the best he could, hands instinctively over his mouth even with the mask.

The powered person following him ran past, and he overheard a curse as they realized they'd lost him, stopping in the isle.

Tommy sprung out from his hiding place, tackling them from behind. He slammed the discs into their back, pinning them to the floor with one arm before smacking them over the head with the other, knocking them unconscious. He stood, trying to stay low, peering through the tables. Gun Man was nowhere to be found.

"Reveal yourself and I won't have to kick your ass!" He called, hoping for a response. Further away, there was a loud crash as something was pushed to the floor. More gunshots. He ducked, covering his ears until they stopped with a click and a curse.

Out of bullets, Tommy thought with a sharp grin. *Got you now, dickhead.*

He leapt onto a table of his own, scanning the room and spotting a figure doing the opposite, fleeing from the tabletops once their weapon was useless. With a shark's grin, Tommy ran, hopping over equipment, boots sliding on papers. The person in front of him ran across the rows, heading in the direction of the plastic cube, aiming for it.

Shit- he's gonna grab the drugs and run-

"Nice try, dickhead!" Tommy yelled, launching himself off the end of the row of tables to intercept them. They both fell to the floor in a heap, Tommy dropping one of his shields to detangle himself, trying to wrap his arm around the other guard's neck. A mistake.

An elbow slammed into his jaw and he reeled back, eyes watering. The person wriggled free, making a mad dash for the cube as he blinked rapidly, trying to clear the fog. He shook his head, sitting up just in time to catch them disappearing into the plastic room.

Tommy kept up the chase, picking himself off the floor and bringing back his second shield. The hood had fallen from his hair, but he didn't have time to fix it. Risky maybe- but the mask would have to be enough for now. He ran over to the plastic, wrenching open the flap with a "Gotcha, bitch-!" that died on his tongue once he saw what was happening inside.

The guard turned, one of the colored vials in his hands- a golden one- with a needle stuck in the top, beginning to draw the drug up into it. "Stay back," they snarled, brandishing it like a weapon.

Tommy swallowed hard, dread pooling in his gut. *Fuck, okay. Not good.* "I won't attack, I swear," he dissolved his discs as a sign of peace, gaze locked onto the drug in their hands. "But I think that shit is a little above your clearance level, yeah?"

They laughed. “You really are a fool, aren’t you? My instructions are to protect this operation,” they tightened their grip on the vial. “By any means necessary.”

“Hey,” Tommy said nervously, holding up his hands. He tracked the golden liquid, watching with rising anxiety as the needle’s chamber filled with it. “Listen- I don’t know what the fuck you’re planning to do with that, but I promise that whatever it is, it’s a really bad idea.”

The guard sneered at him, pulling the needle from the vial and discarding the near empty tube. “You’re right. You don’t know. And it’s going to be your downfall, you off-brand hero piece of shit.” Their hand moved, and Tommy jerked back, fearful of being injected with whatever the hell that stuff was. But the needle didn’t end up in *his* arm.

He flinched as the plunger went down, the entire contents of the needle emptying itself into the guard’s arm. To his horror, he could see it traveling under their skin, sliding through the veins on their neck with a golden light before fading. There was a pained groan that quickly turned into a scream, and Tommy stumbled back, pressed up against the plastic wall.

What the fuck what the fuck what the absolute fucking shit-

The guard had curled into themselves, shaking, muscles tensing all at once as the drug worked its way through their system.

Tentatively, Tommy tried to call out to them. “Hey man, are you-“

Their head snapped up, eyes wide, teeth bared. An eerie glow swirled in their eyes, power thrumming under their skin that any person with an ability could clock as unnatural- *stolen*. They grinned at him, straightening up. “Time to die, *vigilante*.”

“It’s Aegis, asshole,” Tommy quipped back, trying to hide the shake to his voice as he fumbled for the flap in the plastic behind him.

I need to-

I gotta get out of here-

The guard spread their hands wide and jumped at him, aiming for his face. Tommy threw himself to the side, their fingers just brushing the strap of his mask before moving past his head and latching onto the plastic behind.

The world exploded.

He came to with a groan.

Ears ringing, the acrid smell of melting plastic assaulted his senses, sounds distorted and painful. Prying heavy eyes open, he was met with the slow pulse of flames, smoke heavy in the air. To his surprise, the plastic cube was gone, blown to bits. The bright fluorescents overhead burned into his vision, leaving purple spots as he squeezed them closed again. Pain

lanced through his body, and Tommy rolled over, gasping. His face felt odd, blood dripping down his cheek, the cool air brushing against throbbing burns making him flinch.

Air.

He stiffened, ignoring the pain, fear coursing through him. There was air on his exposed cheek. *His face was exposed.*

Shit.

Tommy fumbled for his face, panic setting in when his fingers met tender skin rather than the familiar material of his mask. Whatever that explosion was, it had blown the majority of the mask clear from his face. Scrabbling at his hood, Tommy yanked it as far down over his face as he could, ignoring the pain in his muscles, the burns peppering his skin and the smoke choking his lungs.

Identity came first.

Tommy sat up to find himself surrounded by smoldering flames, the majority of what was flammable in this place having already burnt itself out. To his side lay the prone body of the guard. Tommy didn't bother to check if they were still breathing.

He stumbled to his feet, holding the hood low over his face and making a break for an exit, stumbling as he went. The unexpected blast had scattered the nearby equipment in all directions, and the lights were flickering overhead. Perhaps he was hallucinating, but the sound of sirens seemed to be making its way through the cotton in his ears, shrill, piercing, and *close*. He must've been out for longer than he thought.

Panting, Tommy made his way out of the warehouse, running now, feet pounding the floor in time with ragged breaths that steamed in the late night December air.

His mask was gone. The police were here. Something had caused an explosion, and all Tommy accomplished in that time was to paint a massive target on his back.

Fuck.

He sprinted away from the warehouse, already feeling dead on his feet. But he couldn't go home yet, not like this. Not without a mask, not with the risk of running into Ignition on the way home. If Wilbur saw him like this...

No. Absolutely not.

He needed to lick his wounds somewhere out of the way, where there would be no chance of running into heroes or giving away his apartment. He needed to camp out in a different territory, just for now.

It was time to pay Honeybee and Enderwalk another visit.

Chapter End Notes

AHHH I just love the build up to the photos so much. Suspense. My fucking beloved.

ALSO! I HAVE MADE ART: [Aegis Drawing](#)

He looks awesome and deserves to be appreciated, please check it out.

Anyway, hope you guys enjoyed it, I've got school starting tomorrow (kill me please), so updates are gonna definitely slow from here on out, but I cannot wait to show y'all where this story goes.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Benchtrio. That's it that's the chapter.

Chapter Notes

hahaha yeah hi. It's uh- its been how long?

Squints at previous update time September 6th? A whole ass *month*???

Yeah. Not what I meant to do. I've literally never been more busy or sleep deprived in my life. Senior year, man. If you don't watch out, it's gonna hit you like a train. Specifically one of those high speed extra deadly ones.

Anyway, enough of that. I'm sorry for the wait, but thanks everyone for sticking around this long. I appreciate it. This is in my personal opinion one of the most well-written chapters in this entire work so far. I can't wait for y'all to see it.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was beginning to snow outside. Not the howling blizzards of some other, more wintery places, but a thin coat of frozen fluff, leaving the sidewalks and roofs dusted in white. There was no one outside to play in it, considering the time was far too late for any sane person to be up at this hour, but that only contributed to the serenity of it all.

Gentle music drifted out from beneath a bedroom door, the creeping light from the crack at the bottom cutting through the gloom of the hallway. It seemed the inhabitant of this bedroom wasn't fond of a decent sleep schedule. Then again, neither were the two other occupants of the house.

There was a knock on the bedroom door.

"Hey Wil- you still up?" Came the low question, asking more for permission to enter than an honest answer.

"Mhm," came the muffled reply.

The bedroom door opened, revealing a weary Phil, focused on the tablet held in his hand. “Sorry to bother you at this hour, but I’ve got a report coming in that I want you to look at real quick. Do you know about a- what the hell are you doing?”

Wilbur glared at Phil over the edge of the glossy wrapping paper held in his mouth, fingers covered in strips of tape. Surrounded by tiny paper scraps, discarded bows, and piles of tissue paper, he made quite a sight. A poorly covered box made an island in the sea of wrapping supplies, plastered with far too much scotch tape and looking for all the world like a child had done it. Phil’s eyebrows rose.

“Whatcha up to, mate?”

Wilbur mumbled something unintelligible, focused back on the box in front of him already. He took the paper from his mouth and wrapped it around with meticulous care, plastering on no less than three pieces of tape to keep it in place. Phil watched in apparent fascination at the level of concentration on his son’s face.

Only once the paper was secure did he look up at the man who had so rudely interrupted his work. “What does it look like?” Wilbur held his arms out, gesturing to the mess of festivity scattered across his bedroom floor. “I’m wrapping.”

“Uh-huh,” Phil replied, brows still raised as he observed the spectacle before him. “I can see that.”

Wilbur spun the box, pouting at the sight of a large gap on one of the corners he had failed to notice. Another chunk of paper joined the monstrosity. “Did you need something, old man? I’m a bit busy,” Wilbur said, not looking away from his project.

“I mean, I’ve got this report from Lower coming in- but mind telling me what on earth all this is for?”

“It’s the holidays in a few days, Phil,” Wilbur answered, as if this was an obvious, incredibly important fact.

“I know that,” Phil moved to sit down, nudging some scissors out of the way with his toe, “But we don’t really celebrate anything. You don’t care about the holidays, Wil. I thought you hated them.”

A red blush crept up on Wilbur’s cheeks. “Do not,” he muttered, reaching for a bow and slapping it on the top.

“Do too. I know you- you’re my kid, mate. What’s changed?”

Wilbur mumbled something under his breath, scooping the package up into his lap.

“What was that?”

“It’s for Tommy,” he said, not looking Phil in the eyes, ears red.

Tommy?

For a moment, Phil was confused at the new name, before remembering Tech talking about some blond brat that Wilbur had drug home the other day. Apparently, his son cared more about this kid than he thought.

He smiled. "Wanted to get him a gift, huh? You must be fond of this Tommy of yours."

"Am not!" Wilbur squawked in protest, "I just needed an excuse to give him some gloves and a hat and shit- he doesn't wear anything Phil, you don't understand! His apartment is far from the library and it's cold out there, but the stupid gremlin won't let me give him things, so I've gotta give it to him as a gift and then I won't have to worry--"

Wilbur cut himself off, scowling at the fond look on his father's face. "What?"

"So you care about him, you mean," Phil replied, grinning.

"Do not!"

"Uh-huh. Sure, Wil."

Phil watched his son splutter out protests at the idea that he *cared* about some friend of his with a warm feeling in his chest.

Wilbur had always been the loneliest out of the three of them. Phil had been the first to become a hero, had practically invented this way of life. And Techno was a lone wolf- protective of those he loved, but able to function just fine on his own all the same. But Wilbur- Wilbur needed people. Phil had always felt some level of guilt at encouraging him to pursue life as a hero, for letting him enter a world that locked you away from everyone else.

He and Techno tried, of course. They pulled Wil out of his room, sent him on errands, tried to check up on the youngest of their family as much as possible. But in a family full of heroes, there was only so much time. Only so much he could do to keep his son happy, to keep the loneliness away.

"Tell me about him," Phil interrupted, setting the tablet down for a moment. Hero work could wait for once.

Wilbur paused, eyes meeting his. "About Tommy?"

Phil nodded.

"Well, he's--" Wilbur laughed, shaking his head. There was a gleam in his eye that Phil hadn't been able to find in a long time. "He's incredible, Phil. You wouldn't believe it. I met him at the library- you know that one in Lower that Techno insists on going to? That one. And so basically this kid starts cursing me out, first time I speak to him--"

They sat there for a while, the minutes trickling by as Wilbur recounted the story of his friendship with a spunky teen named Tommy, Phil listening with attention, smiling the whole way at the enthusiastic gestures and peals of laughter that punctuated each retelling.

“...And then he made me clean up with him. I can’t believe it! It was *his* plan to make a fort in the seating area, don’t know why I let myself be roped into that, the persuasive little bastard.” Wilbur sighed, shaking his head with a laugh. “You’d love him, you know.”

“I’m sure I would.”

“He’s a good kid,” Wilbur continued, looking down at the box in his lap, tracing the creases with absent-minded fingers. Some of the joking tone left his voice, dipping into something more soft. “He deserves the world, Phil. He deserves so much more- needs someone to look out for him. And I swear to god I’m going to do it.” A stubborn gaze met Phil’s own, determination and all sorts of protectiveness burning in it. This kid meant everything to Wilbur. He could tell.

“I’m going to give him the world, Phil.”

Someone remind me to thank this kid, Phil thought, I haven’t seen him this vulnerable in years.

“And you’ll do it one pair of mittens at a time?” Phil joked, nudging the wrapped gift.

Wilbur blinked, glancing down. He cracked a smile. “Yeah. One pair of mittens at a time.” He leaned back on his hands, stretching out his legs. “The best parts of the world are made up of little things anyway.”

Phil copied the movement, pausing as his leg hit the discarded tablet. Right. That report.

Reluctant to spoil the comfortable mood, Phil scooped it up, frowning slightly at the screen. Since the initial info dump, there had been more updates to the incident. Shit.

“I hate to change the topic, Wil, but I really have to talk to you about this,” he held out the tablet to his son, who took it unthinkingly, surprised by the sudden mood change.

“What’s going on?”

Phil sighed, suddenly feeling the late hour. “There was an explosion in the industrial area of the Lower district a few hours ago. Blasted a warehouse to bits. Report says there was an initial explosion, followed soon by dozens more about half an hour or so later. Authorities showed up to find the thing entirely on fire- practically burnt to the ground.”

Wilbur let out a low whistle, slowly scrolling through the report on the screen. “Holy shit, that’s a lot of damage. Why’d they send it to you, though? Are they sure it wasn’t just an accident?”

Phil shook his head. “There was a witness claiming it was an attack. Only one to make it out, apparently. What the man was doing out there in the first place, no one knows.”

“Illegal shit, probably.”

He shrugged. “They have no clue. The building was reportedly abandoned, used as storage by a few locals maybe. Everything inside was so wrecked and burnt they’ve got no clue what

was going on in there until some lab reports can come back. Doubt they'll be helpful though, based on the images."

Wilbur nodded, still skimming the document. He got to a certain section and paused, looking up at Phil. "'Suspect not apprehended?' Who's the suspect?"

"Well," Phil began slowly, already wary of treading into this territory. "That's what I needed to talk to you about. You spend a lot of your patrol in the Lower District right?"

Wilbur made a noise of affirmation, going back to scrolling through the report.

"So you're familiar with the environment there? The criminal activity? Outside influences?"

Wilbur's fingers stilled on the screen. "What are you trying to say, Phil?"

He sighed, rubbing at his forehead for a moment before meeting his son's wary gaze.

"How much do you know about a vigilante by the name of 'Aegis'?"

There's an unspoken rule between the unofficial heroes of the city. There was never a need for it to be said aloud, either. It's just one of those things you picked up on after enough time in the field.

Protect your own.

Even if you didn't know someone that well- didn't know their identity, where they stood in opinion on heroes, how long they'd been fighting- it didn't matter. Vigilantes looked out for one another. No questions asked, no favors owed.

Even if he wasn't already friends with them, Tommy wouldn't have felt any hesitation in going to Honeybee and Enderwalk right now.

The tiniest part of him twisted uncomfortably at the thought of dropping in on them maskless, but that was more so a symptom of constantly keeping his identity hidden than anything else. *Besides*, Tommy thought, dropping down onto the familiar rooftop of the other vigilantes' building with a grimace, *Not like I have much of a choice in the matter.*

He limped over to the roof access door, pushing it open easily. No surprise there. It was always left unlocked, for easy entry, or for an easy escape. Either way, his friends had always been confident in their ability to handle whatever was coming their way.

Slowly making his way down the stairs, exhausted, Tommy couldn't help but wonder if they would be able to handle *this*. He smiled, jaw aching. It would probably be entertaining, at the very least.

He reached the last door of the hallway, a corner apartment unassumingly tucked in amongst all the others. The brass number 42 glinted in the dingy light of the complex's hallway.

Tommy heaved a breath, leaning himself against the doorframe for support before raising a hand to knock.

One tap. Two and three, four. One two.

He waited, listening for the sound of footsteps. For the briefest of seconds, a flash of panic coursed through him at the thought that neither of them were home, that he would be forced to hide up on a rooftop, braving the snow.

But before anymore of the doomsday talk could get to him, there was the click of multiple locks, and the door cracked open. The silhouette of a freakishly tall person blocked the light from the apartment behind, and Tommy couldn't be happier to see them.

"Hey End," he smiled lazily, watching as the other vigilante's eyes went wide, face partly visible without the goggles on. "Long time no see, huh?"

"Oh my god-" Enderwalk gasped, voice laced with concern. He swung the door wide open, reaching up and gently pulling Tommy inside. "What the hell happened to you, man?"

"If you must know, bitch boy," Tommy countered, lacking some of the usual enthusiasm behind the comment as he leaned into his friend. "I got myself blown up. Just the teensiest bit though. It's fine."

"It's not- okay. Okay. That's fine. Here- come sit down, I'll go get the first aid kit." Ender led him over to a chair at the tiny kitchen table. As Tommy gingerly lowered himself into it, End strode down the narrow hallway to the left, shouting, "Bee! Aegis is here! We've got a- uh, we've got a bit of a situation!"

"What the fuck has he gotten himself into now?" A voice called back.

Enderwalk sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "What did we say about manners, Bee?"

"That they're stupid and overrated," came the reply.

Ender groaned, disappearing to go find the first aid kit. Tommy laid his head down on his folded arms, burying his grin into his elbow.

God, he loved these two.

A door at the end of the hall opened, Bee wandering out, busy fixing his own mask over his face. The two of them used to wear their goggles around him all the time too, but had since relaxed about it after growing closer in the past couple team-ups. Tommy offhandedly wondered if the mask thing would change after tonight. That would be interesting.

"Sup A," Bee greeted, coming closer, eyes still fixed on the ground as he adjusted the straps to his gas mask. "Nice new name, by the way. Here I was thinking you'd just be Nameless Crimefighter Number 1 for the rest of eternity."

Tommy laughed, wincing a bit as the expression pulled on the bruises and burns on his face. "It's a good one, innit?"

Honeybee shrugged, finally finished with his mask and looking up from the floor. “A bit pretentious, if you ask-“ He cut himself off, staring at Tommy with wide eyes. “What the *fuck*?”

“What,” Tommy said in mock confusion, “Do I have something on my face?”

Bee let out a strangled sound, making a sudden beeline straight for him. “Where the fuck is your mask, idiot?!” He reached the table, reaching out to pull Tommy’s face from his arms, scanning the damage on it. A frown tugged at his face.

Tommy cringed. “About that...”

“He got blown up, apparently,” Enderwalk cut in, returning with a first-aid kit in his hands. “I’m assuming the mask got lost in the crossfire.”

“Au contraire, my friend,” Tommy pointed at him, face still trapped in Bee’s loose grip. “The mask *was* the crossfire.”

“You blew up my mask?” Bee shrieked, letting go of him. “I worked so hard on that! What the fuck, dude?”

“Well *I* didn’t- some prickly bastard did, Big H. Not my fault he had it out for me.”

“That voice changer was so well done, too,” the other vigilante pouted, pulling out the chair next to him and slumping into it with a glare. “Dick.”

Tommy just sighed good-naturedly, reaching out for the first aid kit as Enderwalk set it on the table and took the chair on his other side. It was snatched out of his reach. It seemed they were planning on forcing him to sit through actual decent healthcare again. Damn it.

“Can we please go back to the bit where he said that somebody *blew up his mask*?” Ender cut in, voice full of anxiety as he pulled burn cream and bandaids from the kit. “I think we should go back to that part.”

“Fair point, Boss Man.” Bee squinted over at him. “What happened?”

Tommy shrunk in on himself a little, feeling oddly exposed around the two of them at the moment. For a brief second, the heat of the explosion bloomed across his face, gunshots ringing in his ears. He glanced at Ender and shuddered, the dim image of that picture crossing his mind.

Fuck that.

“Nothing much,” Tommy muttered, reaching up to tug his hood a little lower on his face. “S’not a big deal.”

Bee reached up and pulled the hood off entirely, dragging Tommy’s gaze over to him. “It’s a big enough deal if it meant you were willing to come to us unmasked, A.” The look in his friend’s eyes was nearly startling- the casualness of the new nickname, the genuine amount of concern in the gesture- it threw him off.

These two were friends of Aegis, not Tommy. But tonight he was here as himself more than anything. Face exposed, tired and defeated.

And yet...

Enderwalk's hand tipped his head to the side, gently dabbing at the burns on his left cheek, cleaning them off with meticulous and steady movements.

And yet they still cared, somehow.

The thought unstuck his tongue, and he cleared his throat, trying not to disturb his friend's work.

"I got into a fight. Was investigating this sketchy as fuck warehouse over in the Industrial District- you know that sector just off the edge of my usual territory?" The two nodded. "Went in, fucked up, and got my ass handed to me."

"And your mask blown up." Honeybee added helpfully.

"And my mask blown up," he admitted with a slight nod, quickly aborting the motion when Ender scolded him for the movement. "Say, Bee, you think you can make me another one of those?"

The other vigilante groaned, leaning back in his chair. "You're so fucking *needy*."

"Pretty please?" Tommy pulled out his best possible puppy eyes.

Bee groaned again. "Yeah yeah, fine."

Tommy smiled as wide as he could without getting in hot water with his resident doctor, who was currently plastering what felt like an unnecessary amount of bandages to his cheek. "Thanks man, seriously."

Bee waved him off. "I woulda done it anyway. Can't have you walking around looking like that, can I? You'd scare everyone off with how ugly you are."

"EY--"

"Stop moving," Ender chided, sending a half-hearted glare in his partner's direction. "And quit antagonizing him when he can't fight back. That counts as bullying, you know."

"Yeah Bee," Tommy chimed in. "That's bullyin'."

The vigilante smacked him. He would've retaliated to that, but Ender could be scary when he wanted to and Tommy knew full well if he interrupted the treatment of his face his fellow vigilante was going to want to. Sadly, it appeared Honeybee would live another day.

After that, the room fell into a silence. Not quite an uncomfortable or tense one, but more of the thoughtful, heavy kind. Honeybee sat watching his partner treat their fellow vigilante,

probably still a little in shock at the impromptu face reveal, while Tommy lost himself in a mental replay of the night's events.

The pictures. The gloom of that stupid warehouse, blinking lights glittering back at him like eyes in the darkness. Vials of that weird drug. Gold coursing through veins and glowing eyes, followed by an explosion.

One that felt much too familiar for his liking.

And maybe he was just being paranoid. Maybe he was connecting all the wrong dots.

...And then again, maybe he wasn't.

Enderwalk had finished cleaning up his face, the burns properly taken care of, bruise on his jaw looked at, and a quick inspection to ensure Tommy wasn't hiding any wounds before the first aid kit was packed up. Honeybee had since pulled his phone from his pocket, and was playing some sort of game on it. Loser.

"Hey End," Tommy said tentatively, breaking the silence. "How much do you know about powers?"

The tall vigilante hesitated, a handful of band-aids halfway back to the box. Bee perked up, losing interest in his game at the seemingly baseless question. "I'm not sure what you mean, Aegis. A specific power? Or just abilities in general?"

Tommy leant back in his chair, chewing on his lip. He could feel their expectant gazes on him, practically dragging the words out. "Hypothetically- how difficult would it be to replicate someone else's powers?"

Bee stiffened, looking at him in alarm. Ender was nervous, anxiety back once again as he twisted his hands together. "Aegis, you aren't saying--"

"I'm not trying to duplicate powers, I swear. Just- just humor me, please."

"Well," Enderwalk breathed, still seeming skittish at the mere idea of it all. "It depends on how you would do it. I suppose there's gotta be someone out there with a mimic power, but I suppose you're not talking about that, are you?"

Tommy shook his head.

Ender continued on. "Artificially- I suppose it would be possible, if you use a trace."

A trace.

Tommy dropped his chair back onto the ground, leaning forward with rapt attention. "A trace," he repeated, trying to hide the undertones of worry in his voice.

The vigilante nodded slowly. "It's a universal thing. Despite it not being super common knowledge, traces are everywhere. Each powered individual leaves behind residue when they finish using their--"

Bee snorted.

The glare that was sent his way was nothing less than withering. Bee Boy remained unfazed.

“As I was *saying*,” Ender said pointedly, “It’s like a leftover signature of a power. Depending on what type of ability it is, some traces are easier to identify than others. Take my teleporting for example.”

“Your particles,” Tommy cut in, something uneasy and sick curling in his gut. That awful feeling you get when some part of you knows that you’re right, even when you never wanted to be. “That’s your trace.”

His friend nodded. “Exactly. Take Rook as another. His feathers are relatively easy ones to identify, as they’re often left behind for a little while if they get cut off during a fight or something. Traces are made up of residual energy- they hold a distinct signature-“

“So it’s the magical equivalent of like- DNA,” Honeybee cut in, having finally become truly invested in the topic of conversation.

“And DNA can be used to clone things,” Tommy whispered, horror swimming in his chest.

Ender hummed in affirmation, a solemn expression on his face.

“Why’d you bring it up, Boss Man?” Bee asked, squinting at him. “Don’t tell me you’ve found someone impersonating you or some shit like that.”

Tommy shook his head, slipping his hands in his lap to hide their trembling.

This was bad. This was very, *very* bad.

“Not quite. I, uh- I don’t really think that was it. I was just curious, s’all.”

The others scrutinized him, Enderwalk with a wary sort of concern, Bee with suspicion. Not at Tommy- not thinking he was doing shady shit. They knew each other better than that. But he also knew they could tell he was lying. The only question was if they were going to bother to call him out on it.

“I hope so,” Ender glanced between him and his partner. “If someone had the ability to replicate someone’s powers, especially a destructive one...”

“Or even a hero’s,” Bee chimed in, brows furrowed. “They could pull all sorts of shit and the media would have no clue.”

Tommy was going to be sick. Like vomit, right here on the table.

Was he sweating? He felt all clammy ’n shit. Fuck.

“Well gents,” he suddenly cut in, standing up. While he was still exhausted, he needed to get out of here. “I think it’s about time I head on home. Gotta get back to the wife an’ all.”

“There’s no way you’re older than either of us, dude.” Bee deadpanned, the joke not quite landing in the midst of the sense of foreboding choking the room.

“I still have a wife,” Tommy protested, making his way to the door. “Doesn’t matter how old I am.”

“Legally, it does, but alright,” Enderwalk replied. Neither of them made a move to stop him, to ask him to stay or give them more answers. Tommy could’ve, he knew. For both of those.

But he didn’t.

At the door, Tommy hesitated for a moment, hand on the knob. “Thank you, you guys,” he called back, tone soft. “I really owe you one.”

“Anytime, A.”

“Whenever you need us, we’re here,” Ender added on, some of the lightheartedness creeping back into his tone. “Trust us.”

“Yeah,” Tommy choked out, nearly suffocating on the words. “I will.”

The trek back home was a cold one.

The fresh snow crunched under his boots, numbing his fingers and freezing his breath in the air. The ache of fear inside his chest didn’t help anything much either.

He knew- had known from the instant he had taken a step into that warehouse that the whole operation just screamed *wrong*. But this- this was proof.

They- whoever the sick fuck was- had Wilbur’s powers. They had Rook’s- Wil’s dad. They had End’s. And whoever the hell the green person was. He wasn’t sure about that one, but he was sure that it meant absolutely nothing good.

Sinking deeper into his hood, hands stuffed in his armpits, Tommy shivered. And not just because of the cold.

Maybe he should’ve told Enderwalk. After all, it was his powers at stake here too. If anything, the other vigilantes had a right to know. But he just couldn’t- he cared about them, alright?

And not only that, but Tommy knew how to trust his gut. And when that instinct was screaming at him to get as far away from this situation as possible, he just knew things were going to get ugly.

The further he could keep those two away from the crossfire, the better.

He sighed, scrunching his shoulders up to his ears, nose already numb with cold. He definitely needed to wear his jacket next patrol, if he didn’t want to get taken out by

hypothermia before the bad guys could.

Tommy cut between two buildings, passing the corner he took to get to work everyday.

He couldn't pull Honeybee and Enderwalk into this, but Wilbur...

He wanted Wil to be safe, obviously. But Wilbur was a hero, with the support of his entire family and the Guild to back him up if shit went south. Going to Ignition with this would be the safest choice. It had to be.

Tommy was going to be fresh out of options if that wasn't the case.

He trudged through the thin layer of snow, biting at his lip, brow furrowed.

Ignition would hear him out. Even if Wil didn't know it was him, the two were still close out on the field. They were friends. Hell, Ignition was practically his mentor, at this rate. He'd listen. There'd be no reason not to. They trusted each other.

He'd go to the heroes, once he got a new mask from Bee. Tommy just hoped this case could wait that long.

He hoped.

Chapter End Notes

ominous music plays in the background I'm sure absolutely nothing can go wrong here. Nothing at all. Things are going great.

Thanks for reading! I'm going to try harder to keep up with this work, because I really am fond of the plot and some of the later scenes that I've written, and I really want you guys to be able to experience them. Hopefully the update gap won't be nearly as awful next time, but if shit goes south and it is, I really hope y'all stick around.

Also a bunch of my other works hit some pretty crazy milestones for kudos, plus I've got over 380 user subscribers now. That's absolutely freaking insane. Thanks so much for all the support- I really do appreciate all of it. Love you guys <3

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The calm before the storm. (Plus the storm)

Chapter Notes

That moment when you're supposed to be doing physics homework but you also get slammed by the urge to write so hard that you literally cannot focus on anything else until you finish this chapter and now it's 6 pm and you're lowkey screwed but also new chapter.

I love school. It's my favorite. Ha ha ha (help)

Hi yes hello I am excited- guys guys guess what! The major conflict has begun- the major plot is finally here-

I can't wait. Enjoy, my fellow friends and procrastinators. Shout out to you guys in particular.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The bandaid over his nose itched.

It was an insignificant detail, considering it wasn't the only bandage plastered to his face. But it was irritating and kept taking up his attention, which was bad enough considering how scattered said attention was at the moment.

It had been two days since the warehouse incident.

Tommy was restless. He couldn't patrol. He couldn't sleep, either. Too used to being up at all hours of the night, the lack of exercise was driving him crazy. The pent up energy, the gnawing anxiety in his gut as another day passed without his mask, without the ability to warn the heroes- restless was definitely a word to describe it.

Some might even call him desperate.

But Tommy was Tommy, and therefore didn't. Instead, he resigned himself to another boring shift at the front desk, leg jogging under the table, chin resting on folded arms.

He missed Wilbur.

The man hadn't come by yesterday, which was a little unusual in what had become their new routine. While part of him was relieved to avoid dealing with questions about the state of his face for the time being, the other, larger part of him spent time staring mournfully at the door, waiting for his friend to walk through. Yesterday, Wilbur never did. So far, today wasn't any different. No lovable, pretentious hero walked through the door to save him from his misery.

Neither did anyone else.

It was the holidays, after all. No sane Lower district resident would spend their precious holiday loitering inside a dusty old library.

What the fuck does that make me, then?

Tommy huffed, poking at a pile of papers in front of his face. His nose still itched.

And he still missed Wilbur. Damn.

The minutes trickled past. Tommy lost track of time, zoning out completely, lost in his own world of dark warehouses and spilled books and glowing drugs and bandaged faces and-

"You okay, Toms?"

Tommy blinked, clearing the fog from his eyes, lifting his head. Wilbur stood on the other side of the desk, brow pinched with worry. There was an ugly looking present tucked under one arm, done up with one of the worst wrapping jobs Tommy had seen in his life.

"Tommy?"

He groaned, sitting upright and scrubbing a hand down his face, fingertips catching on the bandages littering the skin. "I'm fine, bitch. Stop bothering me."

This order went ignored, as per usual. The pinch to Wilbur's face only deepened as his friend took in the state of Tommy's face, eyes darkening. The gift was deposited on the desk with little ceremony, cast aside in the urgent need to smother Tommy to death.

"What the fuck happened to your face?"

Tommy just shrugged, leaning into the touch as Wilbur's hands ghosted over the bandages. He had tried to replicate Ender's careful work after replacing them, but he knew they definitely were a lot sloppier than before.

"Fucking hell Toms- can you not go one day without getting hurt? Who..." Wilbur pushed his hair back, a look of dismay clear on his face at the sight of even more bandaids hidden there. "Who was it this time?"

"Your mum," Tommy joked, trying to diffuse the situation and pulling away. Wilbur's hand stayed out, reaching for him even as he stood up, stretching. He nodded at the present set on the messy desk. "The fuck is that?"

Wilbur's eyes drifted down, momentarily distracted by the mention of the wrapping paper monstrosity that he'd brought with. He lit up. "Oh! That's your present! I even wrapped it myself!" He scooped the gift up, holding it out for Tommy to look at.

"I can see that," he deadpanned, watching a bow droop off the side. "But Wil- I don't celebrate Christmas or anything."

"So? Neither do I. Take it."

Tommy's brow furrowed in confusion, hesitantly reaching out to take it at Wilbur's insistence. "So why...?"

"Because I felt like it. Now c'mon-" Wilbur crossed behind the desk, latching onto Tommy and tugging him away, over in the direction of the tiny lounge area. It was their usual hangout spot, when Tommy ran out of things to do. Tommy tucked the gift under one arm, reaching out to snatch something from the pile of papers before letting himself be dragged away.

The reading lounge was actually pretty nice, for what it was. There were a few tables, all with mismatched chairs that had been cobbled together over the years. One of the tables was uneven, the third leg shorter than the rest. Tommy knew this because the two of them had once spent nearly an hour racing various pencils off the surface out of a pure lack of anything better to do.

There was also the couch. A lumpy, slightly short thing, with an ugly flower print that you'd find in some grandma's house, faded with age. But holy shit was it comfortable. It was probably somewhat broken, with how low you sank into it when you sat down.

Wilbur flopped into it, pulling Tommy down to sit beside him. "C'mon, Tommy. I want you to open it."

"Calm your tits, Wil- christ." He sat down, the sagging cushions smushing him up against his friend's side. (Not that he wouldn't have ended up there anyway.)

The gift was snatched out of his arms and set in his lap, all with the eagerness of an over-excited puppy. Tommy raised an eyebrow at Wilbur, who ignored the attitude, gesturing enthusiastically at the gift.

Tommy huffed out a laugh. "Eager, are we?"

Wilbur gently smacked him on the back of the head. "Just open it, will you?"

So he did. It took forever, considering the frankly obnoxious amount of tape Wilbur had used on it, but eventually, Tommy unearthed the box. He ripped it open and peered inside, curious as to what Wilbur could possibly have gotten him.

Nestled inside was a knit beanie and a pair of finger gloves, both a matching shade of firetruck red.

Tommy turned to Wilbur, a question on his face.

“I noticed you never wear gloves or a hat,” Wilbur said, rubbing at the back of his neck. “And it’s winter, and you know- winter is cold. So I got you some.” He smiled sheepishly. “You don’t hate it, do you? I mean, it’s fine if you do-“

He was interrupted by a sudden armful of Tommy, who gave him a tight squeeze around the middle. “I love them, Wil,” he mumbled into his shirt. “Thank you.”

Wilbur grinned, hugging him back. “I’m really glad, Toms.”

“Wait-“ Tommy suddenly pulled away, wriggling out of Wilbur’s grip, despite the other’s protests. “I’ve got something for you too. It was mostly a joke, but...” He reached behind him, pulling out a poorly-made book, one made entirely out of stapled-together printer paper. He held it out for Wilbur to take. Tommy shrugged. “Considering the sap that you are, you might just like it.”

Wilbur took the homemade book with cautious hands, skimming the title. He let out a quiet snort. ““How to Poetry, For Pretentious Pricks”? Tommy, what the fuck is this?”

“I made it,” Tommy grinned, leaning back into the couch cushions. “S poetry, innit? You just read the title, what’s not making sense here?”

Wilbur flipped through a couple pages, skimming the hand-written verses. “Did you write these?”

“Nah, copied my favorites from random books ’n shit. Thought I should enlighten you.”

Squinting at him over the pages, Wilbur looked at him something like wonder in his eyes. “... I didn’t know you liked poetry.”

Tommy laughed. “I work in a library, Big Man. Liking some types of literature is kinda part of the job description.”

He got a nod in response, Wilbur focused on the gift in his hands. Tommy reached into his box, pulling out his own present, marveling at them. Somehow, Wilbur had noticed that he didn’t have the right things to combat the cold. And they were even his favorite color.

He loved them.

“Isn’t this from Minecraft?” Wilbur held up the book, bemused. “Why is this in here?”

“Ey! Don’t disrespect the End poem like that, you dick! Sorry you just don’t have *taste*.”

Hands held up in surrender, Wilbur set the book aside for safekeeping. “I’m sure I’ll learn to like it. Thanks, Tommy.”

Tommy shrugged, fiddling with the gloves in his hands. “You’re welcome,” he muttered, trying to hide a proud little smile.

Wilbur quickly reached out and snatched the hat from the box, before shoving it over Tommy’s head. His entire vision was suddenly taken up by red knitting. Tommy squawked

indignantly, scrambling to peel it back as Wilbur cackled. “Bitch,” he hissed once free, shoving him with a grin. Wilbur laughed harder, and Tommy couldn’t help but join in.

When they both settled down, Wilbur reached out and properly fixed the hat, brushing Tommy’s hair out of his face. Tommy caught the moment his attention drifted away from the hat and back to the bandaids littering his skin, frown tugging at his lips.

“I’m fine, Wil. Doesn’t even hurt anymore. You don’t have to worry about me all the time, you know?”

Even though I’m kinda glad you do.

Wilbur sighed, pulling his hand away. “I know. I know. Sorry.”

Tommy slumped forward, pressing his forehead against Wilbur’s shoulder. Arms automatically wrapped around his shoulders, boxing him in. Wilbur’s head tipped to lean against his own.

“You can’t protect me all the time, Wil.” Tommy said softly, a simple fact that he was sure his friend resented being reminded of. “That’s just life.”

Wilbur pulled him closer, chin set atop the bright red beanie. “Maybe not,” he admitted, tucking Tommy away from the world, shielding him, if only for a moment.

“But I can still try.”

The city was holding its breath.

You could feel it in the air, an odd sort of anticipation hanging around, the atmosphere stale and dead. People seemed skittish, glancing over their shoulders, cutting through streets with an extra boost of speed.

Tommy could feel it too- a sick sense of foreboding lingering in the pit of his stomach. It had been a week since the explosion, and Tommy finally had a new mask, courtesy of Bee. Aegis was once again ready to protect his city.

At least, he had been.

There was no protecting to *do*. The first day back on patrol, he didn’t spot a single crime. No muggings, no robberies, no package theft or fights to break up- nothing. Just empty alleys and drifting garbage. No Ignition, either.

The second day back was much the same. It was already past midnight, and the vigilante had yet to spot a single crime to interfere with. And while that may seem like a good thing to an

outsider, Tommy felt nothing but root-deep unease. This wasn't a sudden shift in morality, some new movement to become peaceful, harmonious citizens.

This was like a barracuda hiding in the rocks as a shark passed by. A predator recognizes a greater threat, and steps off to the side to let them take the floor.

Tommy didn't know who the shark was, but he had a sinking suspicion why they were out hunting.

He pulled himself up out of another empty alley, propelling off the side of a fire escape. His fingers felt frozen, the cold December air and frigid metal burning his skin. There had been enough common sense left over to put on his windbreaker before heading out this time, but still. He was going to have to find a way to stay warm, or January was gonna hurt like a bitch.

He paused on the edge of the rooftop, blowing onto his stiff fingers, trying to warm them up. He really needed a pair of gloves.

You have some already, moron.

But the gift from Wil was sacred- he didn't get gifts often- or really, *ever*. And the idea of wearing the mittens out on patrol, only to get them bloody and torn in the first fight he got into... he didn't want that. Maybe it was stupid, but whatever. Some parts of his life deserved to stay out of this.

Tommy tucked his hands in his armpits, staring out over the darkened rooftops. *As if any part of your life isn't already involved*, that traitorous part of his mind whispered. *Don't lie to yourself- you've got nothing outside of this. Just an empty apartment and some dusty books.*

"I've got Wil," he argued back, because he did. Wilbur was everything to him, at this point. The only thing that he could hold onto outside of fighting until his knuckles were raw.

And the hero isn't wrapped up in this? Listen to yourself-

"Shut the fuck up," he snapped, fists clenched, hands no longer numb. "He's not- it's different. He doesn't know. It doesn't matter."

But winning an argument is always difficult when you're having it with yourself, isn't it?

Teeth clenched, Tommy unfolded his arms, deciding to move onto the next place. He'd been standing out in the open for too long anyway. He started off for the edge of the roof, preparing to make a jump into a balcony a few feet below.

The dull thump of boots hitting the rooftop behind him stopped him in his tracks. "Aegis."

He turned. And there was Ignition, just the hero he had been searching for, had been agonizing over the chance to talk to for the past week. A relieved smile broke over his face, hidden under his mask, but probably visible to the hero all the same.

“Oh thank fuck- I’ve been looking all over for you man, where the hell have you been? There’s this thing-“

“Aegis,” Ignition repeated, voice unusually flat. Tommy paused, confused by the odd tone. He sounded- *wary*, almost. “We need to talk.”

“He didn’t do this!”

“Wil, calm down- there’s nothing confirmed yet. I just need to know- is there any reason he would have for this type of destruction?”

“You’re not fucking listening Dad!” Wilbur paced, wrapping paper sliding underneath socked feet, agitation in every step. He ran a hand through wild hair. “Aegis is a good guy- he wouldn’t-“

Phil sighed, crossing his arms. “Well, the Guild believes otherwise. I’m just trying to do what they asked.”

“The Guild can fuck off, for all I care.”

“Wilbur!”

“No!” Wilbur whirled around, pointing an accusing finger in Phil’s direction. All the calm, soft atmosphere from before had long since evaporated, his son’s walls back up and stronger than ever. “Don’t even try. The Guild doesn’t do *shit*- you know that as well as I do. The only reason no one knows his motives is that no one fucking bothers to patrol out in the poorer districts. If they actually cared, they wouldn’t be having this problem in the first place!”

Phil held up his hands, trying to soothe him. “I know that. But we can’t solve that problem right now. All I need is what you know about the guy- he’s spent too long under the radar as it is.”

Wilbur crossed his arms, glaring. “And why do you think that is? He’s done nothing wrong- he wouldn’t just blow something up for no reason. I know him.”

“Do you?” Phil shot back. “Maybe you don’t know him as well as you think, Wil. Do you know his identity? Any of his other connections? His motivations?”

Silence. Wilbur stood frozen, still upset, but some of the fury had leaked out of him. Stiffly, his son shook his head.

Phil crossed over to him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I’m not saying that it’s his fault. I’m not saying he’s a bad person, either. If you’re willing to work with him as close as you have, there must be a reason.”

“And they’re sure there weren’t any villains present? Some sort of- of powered fight?” Wilbur looked up, meeting his eyes, something in them confused and hurt, his own beliefs warring with that of everyone else. “I can’t believe that he would just-“ Wilbur shook his head. “Red is better than that. He’s- he’s my *friend*, Dad.”

Phil gave Wilbur’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Is there a way you can contact him? Try to find out the truth?”

“Yeah,” Wilbur muttered, distracted. “I patrol with him all the time. I know where to find him.”

“Okay,” Phil said, steady. “Then all you have to do is talk to him. Clear things up. If Aegis is as innocent as you say he is, then he shouldn’t have a problem meeting up and explaining things, right?”

“Right,” Wilbur muttered. His son’s gaze drifted over to the window on the opposite wall, something distant in the look. His jaw was clenched, whether from leftover irritation at the accusation or something else, Phil didn’t know. “I’ll go out to Lower tomorrow. He shouldn’t be hard to find.”

Phil gave his shoulder one last squeeze before stepping away, deciding it would probably be best to leave Wilbur be for the moment. Give him a chance to cool down, to collect himself. He made his way to the door, scooping up the tablet on his way out. He paused, halfway out the door. “...I’m sorry, Wil.”

Wilbur didn’t look at him, gaze still fixed out the window. “Yeah. I’m sure you are.”

Wilbur went out on patrol the next night, traveled all the way to Lower to look for the vigilante.

He went out the next night. And the one after that.

A week passed.

Aegis never showed.

Wilbur glared at the vigilante in front of him, who was frozen on the edge of the rooftop, smile slipping from his face, words dead in his throat. He stepped forward, gaze zeroed in on

the mask and wide eyes barely visible from beneath the other's hood.

"You mind telling me where the fuck you've been?" He snapped, bristling. "I've been looking for you for a week. A *week*, Red."

The vigilante flinched at the harsh tone, almost taken aback. He gaped at Wilbur for a moment, looking unsure. Whatever he had been trying to tell Wilbur about had been forgotten in the moment. "I- I had to replace my mask. Couldn't really patrol without it, Big Man. You know how it is."

"Your mask," Wilbur deadpanned. He had been agonizing over this for a damn *week*, dealing with Phil's pitying gaze every time he came home from patrol empty handed. "Really?"

Aegis let out a shrill laugh, embarrassed. He rubbed at the back of his neck. "Yeah, I kinda-uh. Kinda got it blown up, actually. Funny, innit?" He laughed again, the sound falling flat.

Wilbur's eyes narrowed. "Hilarious." He strode forward, watching Aegis' every movement. "Funny you should mention an explosion, considering the hero Guild has been up my ass for *days*, thinking you blew up a warehouse. And then, when I try to clear your name, you've somehow mysteriously disappeared."

The vigilante froze, awkward laughter dying out. "...What?"

"You fucking heard me," Wilbur growled. For a second, he felt a bit guilty for being this harsh, but for fuck's *sake*. Red was supposed to be his *friend*. One of the good ones. He wasn't- he was just a bit pissed, okay? He trusted Aegis. How the hell was he meant to convince Phil and the Guild of that when the guy wouldn't even show his damn face after the incident?

"I- I didn't-" Aegis stammered, caught off guard. "That wasn't my fault, I swear."

Part of the festering sense of the new distrust in his gut calmed at the vigilante's unsureness.

It seemed like he really hadn't done it, after all. Maybe it was just bad timing. Probably was, considering Red had always had a talent for that sort of thing.

Or he's lying.

Wilbur closed off again. *Or that.*

"I want to believe you, Aegis, I do," he said, stuffing his hands in his trench coat pockets to avoid fidgeting. Or grabbing onto the vigilante. Or- *something*. Because he did. He really, really wanted to believe that his trust hadn't been broken. "But I need an explanation. I can't just believe what you're saying, I need you to give me the truth here- some alternative. Please, man."

"I- you don't believe me?" The vigilante breathed, looking hurt, almost. And- afraid? Not of him, surely.

Right?

Wilbur sighed, frustrated. At who, he didn't know. "I'm sure I will. But the fucking Guild doesn't believe *me*, not unless you tell me what happened. As of now, they think you're some sort of villain, Red. The first time you get on their radar, and it's because you've blown up a damn building."

"That's not what happened! Ignition, please-" the vigilante stepped forward, holding his hands out, seemingly desperate to get him to understand. "I went in there to investigate this weird shit I found. That's what I was trying to tell you before-" In his anxiety, Aegis began to ramble, and Wilbur found himself struggling to keep up. "There's something going on. There's been no one around, the streets have been empty, it's a fuckin' ghost town out here. And- and the warehouse was just part of it, I think. I got caught up in it all, not on purpose- I swear-"

A loud, irritating beep interrupted them. Wilbur's pager.

For fuck's sake. What was it *now*?

He held up a finger for Aegis to hold on, stepping away and pressing a button on his comm to let the call through. "For god's sake Rook- this better be fucking urgent- I finally found Aegis-"

"We need you," Phil rushed out, voice concerningly panicked. *"They're calling in everyone. Since you're already in the field, they've assigned you to the West side of-*

"Rook, slow down," Wilbur cut in, trying to make sense of the rushed instructions. "What's going on?"

"Villain attack. A big one."

"Shit," Wilbur cursed, already moving to the edge of the roof, preparing to take off. "Give me a second."

He muted the call for a moment, turning over his shoulder to look at Aegis, who was watching him with a distressed look.

"Ignition?" He called, "Where are you going? I didn't- I really need to tell you about this-"

"Villain attack," Wilbur cut in, inching closer to the edge of the rooftop. He met the vigilante's eyes. "You can explain later. It's fine. I gotta go- this call is important."

Aegis jolted into motion, trying to follow him, shouting. "So is this! If anything, it's more important! Just- just give me a fuckin' second, man, it won't take long. *Please-*"

The pager beeped again, signaling Phil's impatience to speak to him.

"Later!" Wilbur called out, taking a running jump onto the next roof. The issue with Aegis would have to wait. Hopefully the guy could refrain from possibly blowing something else up in the meantime. He reached up and unmuted the call. "Sorry Phil," he panted, running. "Fill me in."

“Jesus, mate. Took you long enough. There’s multiple attack points all over the city. It’s-”
Phil paused, voice replaced by an uneasy silence and the slight crackle of static.

“It’s what?” Wil asked, still moving. The wind shifted, and he could smell the faint sent of acrid smoke in the air. *Shit.* “It’s *what?*”

“It’s Dream.”

Wilbur’s breath caught, and he nearly stumbled, catching his footing just in time to avoid falling from the rooftops. “*Fuck.* Okay- okay. When the hell did he come back?”

“We don’t know. But whatever the reason- he’s not going easy.”

That- that was not good. Not good at all.

Dream was the epitome of the word 'villain'. He hated heroes. He hated the whole system of power. And he had no qualms with letting civilians get caught the crossfire. If anything, he *encouraged* it.

For a brief second, Wilbur thought of Tommy.

“Where’s the fighting concentrated?” He choked out, praying that it was nowhere near the kid’s area.

“Mostly Central, a few isolated spots in the West side of lower, and one to the North.”

Wilbur let out a shaky breath. Good. That was good. No where near the library, or the general area of Tommy’s apartment. He’d be safe, as long as Wilbur did his job and stopped this mess before it got out of hand.

“And who’s he working with? You said there were multiple areas- what other villains have joined him?”

Phil drew in an audible breath, the sound unsteady. *“He- isn’t.”*

Wilbur balked. “What do you mean, *he isn’t?* What the hell does that mean?!”

“We don’t know! There’s been multiple sightings of Dream all over- at both different and same times, all in spread out places. No one knows what’s going on.”

Wilbur cursed, blood running cold. “So he’s just-“

“He’s everywhere at once, Wil. And we’re not sure how to stop him.”

Tommy watched Ignition- watched *Wilbur* leave, shocked. His mind whirled.

He hadn't been able to tell the hero about the drugs. He hadn't even been able to get the words out, too busy being yelled at about accusations that the Guild thought he had blown up a building.

The fucking Guild thought he had *blown up a building*. He- *what the fuck?*

And now, on top of it all, there seemed to be a villain attack. And Tommy couldn't even go help, couldn't try to assist the heroes from the shadows like he normally did- escorting civilians out of the way, helping to put out leftover fires, even stepping in to watch Ignition's back when he could.

Because the Guild had it out for him now. Even if Wilbur believed in his innocence- and he couldn't even be sure about *that*- every other hero would take it as an opportunity to arrest him, to bring him in for questioning.

Fuck.

Distracted, thoughts buzzing with anxiety and unsure what else to do, Tommy slowly picked his way across the rooftops, heading home. There wouldn't be any criminals to stop now, even if they had been out. No one was stupid enough to be out during a villain attack, especially one big enough to require Ignition as back up.

Over the edge of some of the tallest buildings, Tommy could see smoke creeping through the skyline, greasy black smudges against the dark night sky. The fighting seemed to be concentrated around Central, for now. Maybe something a little close to Honeybee and Enderwalk's territory.

He hoped they were all right.

He wished he could've gone with Wil, to make sure he made it out okay.

Instead, Tommy was left in the dark, hoping that nothing drifted too close to his area of Lower. If the fighting messed with his district, he was going out there- hero Guild on his ass or not. The safety of those he vowed to protect came before any petty shit the government decided create.

He landed with a soft thump on his own roof, quickly scaling down the side of the building, relying on muscle memory and little else to reach the window.

No one knew about the drugs. It'd been a whole week, and even he had no clue what had happened with the cases of vials in that warehouse. Maybe they were destroyed, maybe someone took them- and he had failed to tell the heroes.

Tommy pulled open the window and slipped inside, closing it behind him. He let out a shaky breath, still braced on the frame.

He had failed.

He had-

The floor creaked.

Tommy froze. He turned, peering into the gloom of the apartment. His ears strained, holding his breath as to not make a sound.

There was someone here.

Sure, the apartment was shit- empty and old and run-down, but Tommy knew his home like the back of his hand. That creaky board was in the kitchen, and Tommy most definitely was *not*.

There was someone in his fucking apartment.

He took a step forward, hands raised, fingers flexing and ready to call up his shields at any second. If it was just a nosy neighbor, he wasn't about to use his powers on them. But if it was someone else-

Something shifted in the darkness. A shadow, stepping closer.

"Who the fuck are you?" Tommy snarled, eyes skirting the darkness, anxiety thrumming under his skin. "Show your face, you bitch-"

Neon green lit up the dark, and he was slammed into the wall, plaster and sheet rock crumbling around him. Something squeezed around his throat, and Tommy tugged at it, gasping, trying to blink past the harsh glow that made his eyes water.

Footsteps came closer, and slowly his eyes adjusted to the foreign light, revealing a white mask a mere foot from his face, a messily carved smiley face gouged into the front of it.

"I'm Dream," the villain purred, green puppet strings curling from his hands. "And it's *so lovely* to finally meet you, Aegis."

Chapter End Notes

Tommy's not having the best day, is he? What a shame. Wish I could do something about that. Oh well.

Thanks for all the comments last chapter! Sorry for not responding again- I've been literally swamped with school work and theatre work and art class work and college applications- the list goes on. Either way, just know I read them all and adore every one of you. I really appreciate the support guys. Thanks for being awesome :)

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Things fall apart.

Chapter Notes

glances at clock ...shit.

'Tis 1:30 am but I don't care because I wrote the first draft of this chapter in *July* and I've waited this long. I refuse to wait another day.

It's a good chapter. It's so good. You're all gonna hate it and that's why it's good.

Have fun :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There had once been a time when Tommy would come home to a house that wasn't empty.

He used to have parents, after all. Loving ones- sweet ones. The memories of his childhood were locked in gold and warmth, the faded sound of laughter and the phantom feeling of hugs. Rides to school, packed lunches, and a bedtime story to boot.

It hadn't lasted, of course.

But Tommy was resourceful- a smart kid. He could handle himself. He grew up- fought his way through the legal system, found the rare full-time job willing to take on a teenager, got himself an apartment. And it was fine. It was enough.

Even when the place was too quiet, too empty, and nights found him curled up in bed, wishing it wasn't quite so, Tommy dealt with it. It was survival. Tommy was a survivor, always had been. He did what he had to do.

And some times when he came home after a long shift at the library, there was a faint flicker of want, naively hoping that for once, just maybe there would be someone there waiting for him. But there never was. Tommy wished, but there never was.

Now, staring Dream in the face, he couldn't help but lament that fact.

Be careful what you wish for.

Yeah, no shit.

Dream leaned forward, mask nearly brushing Tommy's own. He swallowed uncomfortably, panic rising in his throat as the tell-tale puppet strings pushed against it. The villain tipped his head, studying him.

"You're a lot scrawnier than I thought you'd be," Dream said casually, taking a step back. He hummed, the sound nearly disappointed. "Thought you'd put up a bigger fight, too."

Tommy snarled, knuckles white around the strings at his throat, pinned helplessly to the wall.

Dream sighed. "A shame, really."

"The fuck do you want?" Tommy spat out, glaring the best he could. He wasn't going to show this bastard that he was afraid. He *wasn't*.

Who cares if one of the most infamous villains in city history was apparently still alive and kicking? Who cares if he was being held hostage in his *own fucking apartment*, and that there was no way he could call for help? Who cares if he had just gotten in a fight with his main source of backup, and even if he hadn't, that there was no way anyone would know to come save him?

Not Tommy, obviously. Definitely not.

The trembling of his hands suggested otherwise, and both villain and vigilante knew it.

The villain clucked his tongue, shaking his head. "No, no, little Aegis-" Dream paced away, eyeing the bare-bones apartment, his back to Tommy. The act itself was an insult- the idea that to this man, Tommy was nothing. Not a threat, not even worth keeping an eye on. "You've got it wrong." The mask peeked over the man's shoulder, smile empty and horrifying. "See, it's not what *I* want that matters. It's what *you* want that I'm interested in."

"I- what?"

Dream sighed again, still the perfect picture of a man at ease. "For a vigilante, you're not every observant. You see, Aegis," the man wandered through the room, bypassing the sagging couch and empty table, strings trailing behind him like a sickly cape. "I wanted to know just what you thought you wanted, what you thought you were going to get out of fucking up my warehouse? Hm?"

And despite the airy tone, Tommy's stomach dropped like it had been filled with lead.

"Your warehouse?" He choked out, ears ringing with a chorus of *You've really fucked up now*.

"You know the one?"

Tommy stayed silent. The neon around his throat squeezed, just the slightest bit. He nodded jerkily.

“Of course you do,” Dream said, despite still facing away from him. “You were the one who got nearly all my hard work sent up in flames. It’s a pity that the night guard you fought only had time to get those cases to me and give a statement before he, ah- *succumbed to his wounds*.” He picked up a mug off the counter, one Tommy had forgotten to put in the sink that morning, too distracted on the way to work. “A pity,” he murmured.

Tommy swallowed again, trying to think of a way out of this. He slowly raised a hand, trying to slip his fingers between the power strangling him, trying to loosen it, to free himself. *Anything*.

It was useless.

“So what?” Tommy grit out, ignoring the previous question and hating himself for getting into this mess in the first place. “You going to kill me? Off me as some sort of example like a fuckin’ creep, then dump my body in a river ’n shit?”

Dream continued to turn the mug over in his hands, seemingly ignoring Tommy’s every word. They waited in baited silence, Tommy’s toes scuffing against the floor. Very faintly there was the wail of sirens, ones that for once, Tommy begged would come closer.

They didn’t.

“I meant to leave you out of it, before,” Dream finally said. “I admired you, Aegis.” He looked up, masked eyes boring into Tommy’s own. Nausea crept up his throat at the very idea that this creepy dickhead would admire him for *anything*.

“Fuck off, dick,” he hissed.

“We were fighting for the same side,” the villain continued without pause, but the puppet strings twitched in irritation, jerking a bit around him, tugging him a fumbling step closer. “The side of the people- to save the citizens of this fine city. *My* city. There was no reason to ruin an ally of mine.” Fingers clenched around the ceramic. “But then you just *had* to go and be a nosy little shit, didn’t you?”

Tommy decided that this was where he decided to stop putting up with this whole ‘villain monologue’ bullshit. It was one thing to get on someone’s murder list for interfering with crime. It was another thing for this pretentious, masking-wearing psychopath to stroll into his own damn home and complain about him doing so.

“Are you *kidding me*? You fucking stole people's powers! From my friends! I’m not about to sit by and let you just- get away with that-“

“I stole them from *heroes*,” Dream hissed, posture tense. “Those stuck-up assholes who do *nothing* but corrupt. They sit around in their building, hiding behind the authority of the Guild.”

“They protect the city from people like you- from *villains* actually. But nice try there, buddy.”

“Shut up.”

“Oh, sorry,” Tommy teased, too caught up in the familiar comfort of his faux bravado to notice the tense change in tone. “Forgot that you think you’re a noble bastard or something. You really think that anyone out there,” he jerked his head toward the window the best he could, “Does anything less than hate you?”

Ceramic smashed into the ground, shattering on the kitchen floor. “I *said*,” Dream seethed, “Shut. *Up*.”

The reality of the situation quickly came crashing back down on him, green tendrils digging into his windpipe as the shards of mug glimmered in the low light. Tommy shut up.

“Much better,” the man spat. “As I was saying, Aegis- the heroes need to be knocked down a peg. The media, the people deserve to see how truly useless their heroes are, how little they do to protect those put under their care.” Unease crept back into his gut, twisting his stomach to knots. Dream left the kitchen, prowling closer. Slowly, and much to his surprise, the string around Tommy’s throat began to loosen. “And you, my dear little vigilante,” the tendrils dropped to the floor, leaving him feeling horribly exposed. Distantly, Tommy longed for them back. “Are going to help me.”

Tommy *gaped*.

He let out an incredulous laugh. “Are you kidding?! No fucking way! I’m not helping you- those heroes are my *friends*, idiot-“

Faster than he could process, Dream lunged, catching him by the front of his windbreaker and dragging him closer. Tommy yelped, pushing at the man, trying to get away, but the next words out of the villain’s mouth stopped him dead in his tracks.

“Trust me, *Thomas*, I’m well aware of that fact.”

And the world flipped upside down.

All of the fight drained out of him, replaced by ice-cold shock. Dream had just- that was his name. He was masked and Dream knew his name. The man was in his house and he should’ve known but that was his fucking *name*-

“What?” Tommy breathed, eyes wide as saucers.

This couldn’t be happening. He- this couldn’t be happening. It-

Fuck, no. No-

A shriek of laughter came from behind the mask. The other dropped him, Tommy stumbling at the release. “What, you think I didn’t know?” Dream laughed again. “You were unmasked in my warehouse for nearly ten whole minutes, kid. And even then, there’s nothing in this city that goes on without me knowing about it. I would’ve found you eventually.”

Tommy panicked. He lunged forward, activating his shields. Dream sidestepped, strings shooting out, punching through the walls, snaking through concrete and crumbling supports.

The shield barely brushed past the man's torso, hardly even clipping him. Tommy tried again, aiming with a quick upper cut.

But he was only a teenager, a vigilante fresh on the field by most standards, and Dream was a seasoned villain.

A string snapped around his arm, wrenching it back. He sliced at it with a disc, the thing dissolving with a crackle of power, but not before Dream whirled round and clocked him in the face. Pain bloomed across his cheek. Dazed, Tommy staggered back, and another tendril shot out, tripping him. He landed with a heavy thud on the worn out carpet, a boot digging into his stomach.

"Ignition would be so disappointed," Dream mused, digging his heel into Tommy's gut. He thrashed, trying to sit up, and the other foot stomped into his wrist, grinding it into the floor. "Or should I say, Wilbur? You two really are the best of pals, I've heard."

"Shut the fuck up," Tommy wheezed, venom in his voice. "Don't you fucking dare bring him into this."

"You brought him into this the moment you set flame to my warehouse," Dream snapped back, loose puppet strings whipping around him in a frenzy, flashing a sickly neon glow across the mask. "If you had wanted Ignition and yourself to stay out of it, you shouldn't have fucking meddled with things you would never understand."

"Don't you patronize me, you bastard--"

"If you hadn't ruined my supply of blank trace replicators, I wouldn't have had to waste my valuable resources on such an expensive diversion," Dream sneered bitterly. "Five good doses, down the drain. Not only do I have to cut off more of my own powers now, but you've cost me both doses of Ignition's powers."

Tommy stiffened beneath the boot.

Both? As far as he could remember, there had still been one of those gold vials left when his mask had exploded. So what did Dream...?

"So as a result, I've made the executive decision to use you as a replacement," the man continued, glare fierce enough that Tommy could feel it through the mask. His breath caught at the implications of those words.

Tommy's trace was one of the harder ones to get. Unlike Enderwalk's or the Rook's, who naturally left behind remnants of their power, Tommy's trace had to forcibly come from his shields. And really, the only way to get a piece of those was to completely shatter them through brute force.

This, Tommy knew, was not a painless experience. It left him drained, as if someone had been punching their way through his arms rather than his discs. Powers were an extension of one's self- you break them, and to some extent, you break their user as well.

“I’m not going to be some fucking lab rat,” Tommy sneered, ripping his arm out from under Dream’s boot, holding back a wince at the throbbing pain in his wrist. “I’d die first. I don’t care if you say you’re not going to kill me- I’ll do it myself if I have to.”

A few strings ripped themselves from their hiding places in his walls, piercing into the floor around him, caging him in. A couple punctured through his still activated discs, cracking large spiderwebs into them.

“You’re so *dramatic*,” Dream complained. “Your stupid little discs are useless to me. I’m after you, Thomas. Not Aegis. *You*. The whiny blond kid who has somehow managed to befriend Ignition, the hero I was counting on to ruin the Guild before you decided to fuck all of my planning up. God, you’re such a nuisance.”

Tommy’s head whirled.

...Could this get anymore confusing?

Here he was, trapped in his own apartment after a fight with Ignition, being told by a volatile supervillain that the reason he had been hunted down in the first place was because of his connections to Wil.

How the hell did that make sense?

Tommy let out a derisive laugh. “If you think for one second that Ignition, of all people, would side with you- you’re even stupider than I thought. He’s already the least stuck up hero out there, and the Lower district loves him. He’s not gonna rip down the Guild because of some- some grudge or whatever.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Dream agreed, much to his surprise. “But he’s volatile. His powers are destructive- well known. Which is why I took so much care to replicate them. If the media had gotten one *hint* of Ignition using his powers when he shouldn’t, regardless if it was actually him, they’d have a field day. The people would lose trust- and what happens if they can’t even trust their only true hero? The whole system would crumble. But unfortunately, that plan didn’t work out on account of you ruining my production.”

A brief flash of pride grew in Tommy’s chest at the genuine annoyance in the villain’s tone, at the idea that he had thrown such a wrench in Dream’s plans. But then a heel was squeezing the air from his lungs and it quickly withered again.

“So I got lucky. Dug into your identity and found a lovely little alternative,” Dream purred. “You want to know what it is?”

Tommy shook his head. It did nothing.

“I’m not going to kill you, Thomas. I couldn’t- Wilbur Soot cares far too much about you. I’d become Ignition’s target, the inevitable antagonist on his quest for revenge. And that just wouldn’t do. Positive press for the heroes? No. Now, if his little vigilante friend, his dear *Aegis* were to be at fault, well,” Dream let out a humorless chuckle. “He’d have been

betrayed, stabbed in the back. His own friend, responsible for the death of the only other person he holds dear outside of family. Tragic, isn't it?"

A rapid pulse thundered in Tommy's ears. "He'd never believe you. I wouldn't do something like that- he knows better."

Dream scoffed. "Does he? I think I recall a certain incident with a warehouse a week ago that might change your mind on that one."

And Tommy didn't want to let that get to him, hated that he hesitated. But...

Ignition, *Wilbur*- really had been irritated with him up on that rooftop. How much worse was it going to get if the Guild blamed him again?

How sure was he that Wilbur would believe him this time?

Not sure at all, in fact.

"So what," Tommy shot back after a moment of silence, hating how trapped he was. Boxed in by words and power alike. Useless. "You somehow fake my death, blame me for it, and then expect me to just stay quiet? Who cares if Ignition doesn't believe me at first- I'll just- I'll convince him, somehow."

"You really expect him to listen to you?" The mask tipped to the side, mocking. "Pathetic."

"Fine, then I'll- I'll unmask in front of him," Tommy declared, desperate to poke holes in this plan, to get some sort of leg up. Even if the very idea of it filled him with dread, he knew. If it came down to it, Wilbur would just have to learn who Tommy really was.

And considering what Dream was threatening right now, that seemed like a very real possibility.

Dream studied him for a moment. Perhaps considering the validity of Tommy's threat, perhaps planning out the best way to skin him alive. At this point, Tommy had discovered one main thing about the guy- it was impossible to read him.

"I'm going to give you a choice," the villain finally said, leaning in close, bile rising in Tommy's throat at the pressure on his front, leaving him breathless. "Either decide to be your own martyr, Thomas," A hand reached up, pulling the mask to the side, revealing one acid green and one burning golden eye, both filled with a horrifying brand of malice, "Or I kill Wilbur Soot, as well as his brother and father. And trust me when I say this-" The man was right by his face now, whispering as Tommy's breath caught, "You can run all you want, fight however you like, but I *will* follow through. That's a promise."

Dream pulled back, and Tommy watched, horrified, as one by one, the green cables buried into the walls of the apartment snapped free, plaster and concrete crumbling, grinding together. The flimsy ceiling above him groaned.

Dream cackled, a new source of light joining the dust choking the dim room. The familiar golden glow pooling at his fingertips enough to make Tommy want to throw up. "I'll give

you a minute to think it over, Aegis,” Dream called, reveling in the vigilante’s shell-shocked look. “But don’t take too long. Wouldn’t want to be caught in here once it goes out with a bang, now would you?”

With a final, swift kick to Tommy’s ribs, one that left his eyes watering and lungs screaming for air, the villain stepped over him and strode out of the apartment. Presumably to go blow it to hell, and then frame Aegis for it.

And then Wil would think he’s dead. And then Ignition would be on his ass, and so would the entire Guild. And Dream would get away, and he- he-

Fuck.

Heaving, Tommy curled up into a ball, plaster dust burning his eyes, clinging to his skin.

Wilbur was going to hate him, unless he managed to convince the heroes that somehow, Dream was behind all this. And if he did-

Wilbur would die.

Dream would kill Wilbur. And Techno. And Wilbur’s dad.

Who fucking cared if they were heroes- if how helpless Tommy had been during that entire ordeal was any indication, the fact that those three were heroes didn’t mean *shit*.

He couldn’t-

Wilbur would hate him.

He’d seen how much Wil cared about him. The bagels, the visits to the library, the mittens and hugs- Wilbur cared. And shit- Tommy cared right back.

If Dream got away with this, Wilbur would hate him. He could hardly stomach the thought. That stony, dull tone Ignition that had first had at the beginning of the rushed interrogation on the rooftop, directed at him until the end of time. The idea of betraying Wilbur like that, willingly ruining what they had-

It made him want to cry.

But on the other hand...

Tommy curled up tighter ragged breaths tearing at his throat, tears bubbling over.

On the other hand, Wilbur would-

Wil would-

No. *No.*

He refused to be the reason for that. He *refused*. If Wilbur had to hate him, if he had to break his heart, pretend to be dead to keep him safe, fine. Fucking *fine*. He'd do it.

Good things were never meant to last, anyway, right?

Shakily, Tommy pushed onto his hands and knees, hissing at the pain in his wrist and throbbing of his torso. He staggered to his feet right as an explosion rocked the building. He screamed, nearly falling over as the floor shook beneath him. The walls groaned in protest, plaster raining from the ceiling.

In a split second decision, Tommy made a break for his room, scrambling to grab anything he could before the building came down around him. Fire alarms went off, shrieking over the sound of muffled screams and slamming doors. Tommy stumbled into his room, snatching the bag he always brought to work, the one that held his wallet and most of his useful things.

Another explosion, albeit smaller. This time, the whole building shook, and the smell of smoke invaded the room, thick and oily. Smothering. Coughing from the dust, Tommy scrambled out of his room without a glance back, eyes set on the window he had come through only a little while before.

Chunks of the ceiling caved in, and he slung the bag over his shoulder, holding up his damaged discs in a desperate attempt to protect himself. A large chunk of debris landed on top of them, jarring his right shoulder, which screamed in protest from the weight.

Tears in his eyes, Tommy threw it off, lurching toward the window. With fumbling hands, he tore open it open, the cold night air a frigid contrast to the flames roaring on one side of the building. Sirens screamed a few blocks over, far too close for his liking. Down below, people staggered out of the complex, frightened and weeping. Tommy's heart ached, hating himself for bringing this upon them, for not being able to help.

He scrambled out the window, deactivating his shield to clutch the ledge with shaking hands. Carefully, he started to scale down the wall, foregoing the fire escape and inching around the corner of the building, out of sight of the crowd down below. Smoke billowed into the air, accompanied by dust as the building swayed dangerously beneath his hands, people on the street screaming to get clear before it collapsed.

Some point past halfway down, his injured shoulder gave protest, sending a sharp pain up his arms that had Tommy gasping aloud. His fingers slipped. He scrambled for purchase, but found none, plummeting through the air. At the last moment, he instinctively activated the discs, positioning them beneath him and curling into a ball. They took the brunt of the impact, cracking clear through against the pavement. It wasn't a devastatingly far fall, but it knocked the wind out of him, only contributing further to growing number of aches and pains.

Outside the alley he had landed in, police cars screeched to a stop, lights flashing, sirens shrill and loud. The building next to him gave another ominous rumble, and Tommy had enough sense left to drag himself to his feet. Using the wall of the opposite building, he stumbled away.

One step at a time, Tommy, he told himself, tears streaming unheeded down his face, clinging to his mask and leaving trails in the dust. *Just- one step at a time. Get clear, find a way to stay low, and-*

...and-

A sob tore through his mask.

Couldn't he just have one nice thing? Was it too much to fucking ask to be allowed to trust someone? To be cared for? To be wanted?

He hobbled around a corner, down another alleyway. A frustrated scream escaped him, muffled by the thunderous roar, the final cacophony of concrete as the apartment, his *home* collapsed behind him.

The rush of dust and air that followed was enough to push him to his knees. He didn't bother getting back up. Instead, Tommy pressed up against a dumpster, cornering himself. He didn't care about the smell, didn't care about the thin layer of muddied, sullied snow that soaked his bones with cold.

Hands slipped under his hood, burying themselves in hair gritty with plaster. They trembled. Tommy bit back another strangled cry, curling up even tighter.

What the hell was he supposed to do?

The blue and red lights pulsed on.

There was no one around to give an answer.

Chapter End Notes

Title drop? I finally have a fic where I managed a title drop? No way! (I had way too much fun finding a way to put that in there- trust me)

Can't wait to see the reactions to this one, I have a feeling they're going to be incredibly entertaining. *sits back and sips hot chocolate because tea is disgusting*

Thanks for all the support so far, I'll see y'all on the next update and after I've actually gone to bed lmao. Hope you're all doing well! :)

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Wilbur POV lol

Chapter Notes

Ayo! New chapter for y'all, ever so glad to be back. And yes, it's angst. Duh.

Thought I should warn you ahead of time. Anyway, your favorite author has been very busy and school can kiss my ass because I hate it like 75% of the time but keep your grades up children. 'Tis important.

Brilliant life advice aside, enjoy the chapter my friends.

TW: Some mention of like, unhealthy coping mechanisms? I dunno, there's not anything serious, just a heads up that Wilbur is *not* having a good time

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The city was a mess.

Buildings torn apart, cars crumpled like cans, smoldering fires and emergency responders spread thin as the media scrambled to inform the public as to what was going on. Blocks away, the distant sounds of fighting could still be heard, but for now, the West side was clear.

Ignition stood, leaning against a torn-up brick wall as he caught his breath, arms stinging from various bruises and cuts at the hand of the infamous “villain” they had been fighting. He watched his fellow hero Warden restrain the Dream knock-off, the phantom glow of neon strings still bright behind his eyelids.

He sighed, reaching up to scrub at the soot and dried blood caking his hair.

God, what a shit time to be a hero.

Wilbur had come running to his designated position, only to find Dream wreaking havoc on the West end of the city, inching closer and closer to Central, which was already under a separate attack and being handled by Rook and Revenant. Fellow heroes were locked in combat in other sectors to the North end as well.

Throughout it all, Wilbur couldn't help but be grateful Lower was being left alone. If there was one bright side to this whole mess, that was it.

They had managed to get the West side maniac under control, but not without a fight. Broken glass glittered in the streets, street fronts partially caved in, and the bitter smell of gunpowder hung in the air from the use of Ignition's own powers.

His arms still stung from rope burn and bruising from those fucking puppet strings.

And finally, once Warden had gone to de-mask the bastard—

A mimic.

The “Dream” they had been fighting hardly matched the villain's description at all. No famously acid green eyes, wrong hair color, even the build was off, now that they were able to get a good look at him. And yet, an identical mask and powers.

First the shit with Aegis, and now this. Wilbur sighed again.

I want to go home and take a god damn nap.

“Alright, authorities are on their way to take him in.”

A hand clapped his shoulder, and Wilbur hid a wince at the way it smarted against his aching muscles.

“Nice work, Ignition. Thanks for having my back,” the Warden said, gazing down at the villain on the ground in front of them, who uselessly tugged at the cuffs on his wrists.

“Yeah,” Wilbur replied faintly, listening as the warble of sirens grew louder, cop cars slowly picking their way through the destroyed streets. “Just doing my job, man. You know how it is.”

“Still, you were pretty far out. I appreciate it.”

He hummed in response, listening to the crackle of static and muted voices coming through his earpiece as the others worked to get their respective fights under control. It sounded like they were having a harder time of it than the two of them had had.

“What were you doing out in Lower anyway? That's not on your official patrol route, at least I thought. They don't really send people out there.”

Wilbur scowled. “Trust me, I know.”

Warden's brows raised, what little of his face that was visible outside of his custom gas-mask seemingly surprised by the animosity in that statement. “I- Sorry. I didn't mean to—”

“It's fine,” Wilbur cut him off, although it clearly wasn't. “I just got into a disagreement with a friend of mine before this, is all. I'm not in the best mood. Don't take it personally.”

"You mind telling me where the fuck you've been?"

"That wasn't my fault, I swear."

Yeah, a *disagreement*. Sure.

Warden looked at him with sympathy, but before he could say anything else, the police arrived on the scene, radios crackling and lights pulsing. Wilbur raised an eyebrow, jerking his chin toward the approaching policemen in question. Warden nodded.

"I'll handle them, you just—" He gave Wilbur's shoulder a more gentle squeeze, "Just catch your breath for a second."

"Aye aye, captain," He muttered, slumping further against the brick. It dug uncomfortably into his back, but at this point, Wilbur couldn't bring himself to care.

Aegis, now this— he just— it was almost too much.

I should go find him again he thought, picking at the sleeves of his trench coat. They were practically shredded from the puppet strings. He'd have to get a replacement soon, or PR was gonna have a fit about his public image again.

But are you really willing to listen right now?

Static hissed in his ear.

Wilbur couldn't help but feel the answer was no.

"We need reinforcements," crackled through the comms, and Wilbur stiffened. Revenant's voice was distorted, slightly winded. That in itself was concerning— it took a lot to tire Techno out.

Without hesitation, Wilbur shook off his fatigue, pushing away from the wall and unmuting himself. "I'm available. You need backup in Central?" His feet were already carrying him in that direction, weaving between police cars and leaving Warden to clean up by himself.

"No, we've almost got it under control. Don't come to Central, Rook and I are clear."

"Then what—"

"There's a new event in the Lower district— some sort of disturbance in an apartment building, few blocks down from the business sector—"

Wilbur's breath caught.

The library was just on the outskirts of the business sector. Tommy's apartment wasn't much further. The kid had never told him where it was exactly, but Wilbur couldn't help himself from secretly following him home on a couple nights when Tommy was particularly out of it, or his own anxieties just wouldn't let it go.

He broke into a sprint, praying to any god that was listening that it wasn't in Tommy's area.

"Police are spread too thin, they're asking for hero assistance until they can get enough personnel to deal with it. Can you—"

"I've got it," Wilbur interrupted, scaling a fire escape with ease and cutting his way across the rooftops. "I'm already on my way."

"Sounds good. Watch your back."

"Only if you do the same."

With that, the comms muted and Wilbur focused all of his energy into running like hell.

He was only a few rooftops away from the suspect location when the first explosion hit.

The rooftop rumbled under his feet, shaking with the force of it. Wilbur gasped, falling to one knee as smoke and flame billowed into the dark sky, a blast of heat rushing toward him, cutting through the brisk winter air like a knife. Screams sounded from the street below, car alarms blaring.

As if this night couldn't get any fucking worse.

Wilbur cursed, shakily getting to his feet and scrambling for the edge of the rooftop to get a better view at what the fuck was going on.

Dread churned in his stomach, deep and heavy with that inherent sense of *something is very wrong*.

The apartment building in front of him was smoking, the far corner of it sheared clean away, flames licking the night. From what he could see through the smoke, people were already streaming through the doors in a blind panic to get out.

He jammed his thumb into his comm, unmuting himself while clambering down from the rooftop as fast as possible.

"We've got an aggravated situation— explosion in Lower," Wilbur rattled off, feet landing on the pavement, "Not sure of the location yet, there's too much smoke in the way to get a clear view—"

"What?" Phil's voice cut through among a jumble of other replies. *"How is that possible? We didn't have any sightings of villain activity in that area—"*

"I don't fucking know, Rook, but I need help— there's probably still people inside."

A sobbing woman crashed into his side, and on reflex Wilbur caught her, steadying her feet on the sidewalk before plunging back into the growing crowd on the street. Phil and the other heroes continued trying to talk to him over the comms, but Wilbur tuned it out, tunnel vision setting in with the stress of the moment. People swarmed, calling out to each other, crying children searching for their parents, people gaping up at the ruined apartments in shock. The building gave an ominous creak, shuddering in place.

“Everyone get back!” Wilbur yelled over the panic of the evacuees, pushing people away from the building with barely restrained urgency. There were a few muffled cries of relief at the realization that Ignition had arrived, that the heroes had some sort of control over the situation. “This place could come down any moment, you need to get clear!”

People rushed past him, grabbing onto their children, the neighboring buildings emptying out as the streets grew full with people trying to get clear before they got caught in the crossfire. With evacuation in full swing, Wilbur whirled around, focused on the flaming building in front of him.

Techno’s voice crackled over the earpiece. *“Ignition, we need a location. Is it the same area I sent you to before?”*

“Yeah,” Wilbur huffed out, peering through the flickering shadows, bustling bodies and smoke to make out the apartment name scrawled on the front of the building. “It’s—“

The words turned to ash in his mouth.

“It’s what? You cut out, Ignition.”

The stupid, tattered awning out front. The sad, tiny bush by the door that he had watched the kid give a friendly pat before disappearing through the battered front doors.

It was Tommy’s apartment.

“Wilbur?”

It seemed no one had been listening after all.

He blinked, breaking out of his haze, feet still frozen to the pavement. “It’s Tommy’s apartment,” he whispered in horror.

“Wilbur,” Phil called this time, worry audible even over the comm. *“Wil, what’s going on—“*

Maybe he’s not home, Wilbur tried to reason, trying to swallow down the panic clawing at his throat. *Maybe he fell asleep at work, or went for a walk. Maybe—*

“It’s— it’s Tommy’s apartment,” he choked out, whirling around, desperately scanning the retreating crowd for someone tall, a head of blond hair, for *anything*— “It’s his apartment, it’s his fucking *apartment* and he’s always home at this time—“ He scanned the crowd again, taking careful note of any familiar faces, trying to feed the tiny speck of hope still in his chest. “*Fuck*, I don’t— I don’t see him—“

"Wil, you need to calm down--"

Wilbur ignored them, breaking out in a dead sprint for the front door.

He needed to find Tommy. What if he was still inside? God, if the kid was hurt--

"Ignition?"

Tommy could still be inside, and Wilbur had promised to protect him. He had *promised*--

The second explosion hit.

Wilbur staggered, gasping as more flames burst from the windows on the left side of the building, the blast of hot air searing his face. The apartment groaned, shifting dangerously, bricks crumbling, glass falling from the sky in a broken, crystalline rain. The world became a cacophony of noise-- people screaming, the sounds of police sirens nearing, with the ringing in his own ears the loudest of all.

Recovering the best he could, Wilbur launched himself at the front doors, desperate to do *something*.

He yanked open the front door, oblivious to how reckless he was being.

"Ignition! Come in--"

A body crashed into his, reeking of smoke. Instinctively, Wilbur grabbed on, pulling the two of them away from the unstable tons worth of concrete and brick waiting to come down on their heads and to the safety of the other side of the street.

He glanced down at the person latched onto him, hope flaring at the sight of blond hair, only to shrivel at the realization that it wasn't the right shade to be Tommy.

Startlingly green eyes stared back at him, blown wide and filled by panic. Soot coated hands gripped his forearms, sinking into the fresh bruises there. "Please- he's still in there-" The man pleaded, frantically looking over his shoulder at the inferno licking the sky. "You have to get him out, he's still in there--"

Wilbur gripped right back, utterly, awfully desperate. "Who?"

"My neighbor!" The guy cried, hold like iron. "He didn't get out, I saw him. There was this masked guy in the way, I couldn't-- He's just a kid. *Please*--"

Wilbur shook him slightly. "*Who?*"

"Thomas," he guy choked out, clinging to him. "His name is Thomas."

"Thomas?" Wilbur gasped, trying to pry off the stammering stranger, wanting him to say it wasn't right, that they were both overthinking it, somehow. That Wilbur was just being paranoid a few seconds ago and really, everything was okay, because it had to be, right? "As in Thomas Innit? Blond kid, loud? Goes by Tommy?"

“Yes!” The guy screeched, near hysterics. “Yes, that’s him!”

God, no—

“*Shit—* Where is he? Which floor? I can—“

The man shook his head rapidly. “He’s trapped, you have to—“

With a roar, the supports of the apartment complex gave way.

Wilbur yanked them further down an alley, chased by billowing clouds of dust, debris peppering their skin. The sting was sharp on his cheeks, burning in the December air.

“Wilbur! What the fuck is happening—“

The world grew still.

Ash and dust fluttered past them, gathering on the asphalt like snow, a tragic mockery of the real thing. His grip on the stranger grew lax, hands falling limp to his sides. The other man pulled back, tentative at first, but then he drew away quickly, disappearing into the streets.

Wilbur let him go.

He couldn’t take his eyes off the flames still weakly guttering in the ruins, jagged rebar spearing the sky.

He had watched Tommy go through those doors only a few days ago.

He had seen Tommy at work this *morning*.

Smiling, laughing, sinking into his side on the sagging couch, eyes bright with mirth and shining like the goddamn sun.

And now, it seemed, that smile was buried under a hundred tons of rubble.

He— *God—*

The hero sunk to his knees, eyes wide and unseeing. Red and blue lights washed over the mess of it all, lighting up his pale face, highlighting the shallow rise and fall of his chest. The hero took no notice, one hand braced on the cold ground, the other held to trembling lips.

That’s where Revenant and Rook found him, still staring, tear tracks cutting clean through the dust on his cheeks.

They took him home.

Part of Wilbur stayed.

"...Authorities are still working to clean up the wide-spread destruction left behind by multiple villain attacks that took place late last night."

The tv flickered, harsh light washing the otherwise dim room in an array of shifting colors. The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon, bringing with it the fuzzy grey light of morning.

"While the Hero Guild responded promptly to the crisis, property damage will be costly to fix, and there have been multiple casualties reported, including fatalities. Residents are cautioned to stay inside until clean-up has been completed, due to unsafe road conditions and poor air quality in some districts."

Wilbur squinted at the mission report in his hands, curled up in a ball on the couch. He hadn't slept yet.

Phil had refused to let him see the debrief, had insisted he go to bed. Wilbur had refused. Techno, bless him, had been on Wilbur's side, explaining to their dad that there was no way Wilbur was going to sleep in this state, and that they might as well give into his want for distraction.

Wilbur had just sat silently on the couch through the remainder of the interaction, hair wet from the shower he had just gotten out of.

Even now, everything still smelt of ash and dust.

"Concerns have arisen as to who exactly was behind these attacks. According to the Guild, the responsible party seemed to have been multiple powered individuals attempting to pass themselves off as the notorious villain Dream. Whether or not this is truly the work of said villain or simply a copy-cat situation, the Hero Guild has yet to confirm."

Wilbur tossed another page of the report carelessly to the side, eyes blurry and gritty, but he couldn't stop.

He couldn't stop.

"Other reports are singling out a particular event of the previous night, citing that an explosion that took out an apartment building in the Lower district was not a result of these copycat attacks—"

Hands stilling, tired eyes flickered over to the tv, watching with an unreadable expression as the image of the ruined apartment flashed across the screen.

"...Rather, witnesses and the authorities are blaming the tragedy on Lower's own resident crimefighter, a vigilante that works under the name of Aegis."

Wilbur stiffened, fog lifting from his eyes at the name. He stared at the tv with rapt attention, lips curling into a sneer as a grainy image of Red popped up on the screen. The reports lay abandoned, their contents much the same as what was being broadcast, albeit in greater detail that he could hardly stand to stomach at the moment.

"According to Guild reports, Aegis was suspect for the destruction of a warehouse, caused by a similar explosion just over a week ago. What his motives are, the Hero Guild has yet to give any input. The records kept on this vigilante are currently limited, due to a lack of previous attention from the public. If you have any information—"

Something ugly and sharp burned in Wilbur's gut, tangling in his ribs. It pulsed beneath his skin, turning the tips of his fingers hot, fury just below the surface.

If he had been in a better headspace, he might've had the sense to be afraid of the feeling.

But the world was ending, and the room was grey, and Wilbur couldn't give a single flying fuck.

He wasn't better, and felt no fear.

"...Contact the police. The vigilante in question is currently being charged as responsible for the death of 17 year-old Thomas Innit, a young man who took residence in the apartment building—"

The tv was rapidly shut off.

The room fell silent.

The sun crept into the sky, illuminating the ugly world that lay beneath.

Chapter End Notes

Hmm, yes. That's rather unfortunate. Poor Wilbur. Whatever shall he do.

Cry perhaps? Skip through the stages of grief and go right for anger? (I like the sound of that one—)

Hope you all enjoyed, sorry for the wait. I'll do my best to not leave you with a cliffhanger for that long again, but you know what? I have like virtually zero time management skills and no actual free time at this point so really that's up to the universe at this point.

Have a lovely morning/afternoon/night everyone. :)

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Aftermath.

(Tommyinnit Manhunt– Not Clickbait!!!)

Chapter Notes

Ayyy! It is currently *squints at clock* uhhh...1:18 am, and I gotta get up at 6:45 for school. What can I say? The grind never stops. I'm just too cool. (Fish when you read this please don't yell at me I'm going to bed right after I swear–)

ANYWAY– It's been a while for this one, yeah? I have to say, I think it'll be worth the wait. This is definitely my favorite chapter that I've written so far for this work. The prose and fancy words? *MWAH* Off the charts this time, I'm telling you. Plus this is ridiculously long by previous chapter standards. Think of it like interest or something.

Enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Techno had never really liked the Guild Tower very much.

Call it aversion from one too many meetings or a byproduct of being around Wilbur's general resentment of the organization for a few years too long, but Techno was over the place.

For one, it just *reeked* of pretentious assholes. The ones who slapped their name on the “contributors” list just to say that they cared. Lemons, too. The whole place smelled far too strongly of lemon cleaner and polish. Half the time, the smell was so pervasive it gave him a headache strong enough to kill. Considering his powers, that was saying something.

Today, of all days, Techno was especially not looking forward to this meeting.

“It won't be very long, Tech, let's just get it over with.”

Techno sighed, staring up at the Tower through the car window as Phil opened the driver's side door and climbed out. “Yeah yeah, I'm goin'.”

With a grumble of protest, he followed Phil's lead, reluctantly opening the door, the comfortable heat of the car's interior quickly stolen away by the December air. He frowned. He'd always been one to run warm, but still. Winter? Disgusting. Anyone who enjoyed the cold was a psychopath.

"Techno! Come on! We're going to be late again!"

"You're literally the one runnin' the meeting, but alright," he shot back, picking up the pace nonetheless. Techno followed in Phil's hurried footsteps toward the massive revolving front door that made up the main entrance of the Guild Tower. It was oddly silent without Wilbur along with them.

Usually by now his brother would already be complaining about the Hero Guild as loud as he possibly could, critiquing how ugly the furniture was, how sloppy security had gotten, the shitty taste in elevator music— you name it.

Instead, there was a nearly suffocating silence as the two of them stepped into the elevator, tinny music playing through the overhead speakers as the doors slid shut. The only other sound was the rustling of paper as Phil shuffled through his notes for the briefing, double checking he had his facts all straight.

Techno frowned. He hated the silence.

"You really think it's a good idea to leave Wilbur by himself?" he asked, staring at the closed elevator doors as the number above them ticked steadily higher.

Beside him, the rustling of paper stopped. Phil sighed. "I— I'm not sure, mate. He's not in the best mindset to be dealing with casework right now. Much less when the case is this... personal."

Techno winced, remembering the look on Wilbur's face when they'd found him in that alleyway. Tearstained, hollowed out, and most surprising of all— *angry*. He regretted it instantly, trying to wipe the memory from the front of his mind.

"Yeah," he muttered. "I guess."

Doesn't mean I have to like it though.

With a pitchy *ding!*, the elevator doors slid open.

They made their way to one of the many nondescript meeting rooms on this floor, Phil pushing open the door with little fanfare. Inside sat a handful of heroes, those who weren't too roughed up after the chaos of the night before and were high enough in the ranks to be allowed on a case as sensitive as this.

The Warden. Blaze. Motley. Fox...uh, Fox-Something-or-Other.

(What could he say— Wilbur was the type to remember names, not him.)

Or in other words: Sam, Sapnap, Quackity, and Fundy, respectively, who all perked up when the two of them entered the room.

Techno settled into the seat beside Sam, Phil remaining at the head of the table.

Motley sat up from where he'd been lounging back in his chair, crossed ankles thrown up on the table. He frowned. "Where's Ignition?"

Techno grimaced. Of course Quackity would call attention to it. It'd been like two seconds.

Bruh.

"He's busy," Techno supplied, leaning back in his chair in a facade of nonchalance. *Probably busy losing out on sleep and spamming the self-destruct button while he's at it.* "Couldn't make it."

Sam's brow furrowed, and the man leaned forward in concern, mirroring Quackity. "Is he alright? I never heard back from him after he got called away from the West End."

"He's on personal leave," Phil answered quietly, setting down his papers.

That resulted in a momentary hush, no one liking the implications of that statement. This was *Ignition* they were talking about here. Wilbur Soot didn't *do* breaks, much less personal leave.

"Oh god, he's hurt, isn't he?" Fundy piped up, eyes rapidly flicking back and forth between Phil and Techno's solemn faces, worry lacing his features. "Is it bad?"

Techno winced again, avoiding his gaze. "Uh...not quite. Phil, why don't you just— just explain. It'll be easier."

There was a round of objections, the others unwilling to let Wilbur's lack of presence go that easily. Phil held up a hand, and the room fell silent. The older hero braced himself on the edge of the table, taking a deep breath.

"As you're all aware," he began, eyes trained on the polished mahogany beneath his hands. "Last night was a frenzy. Just past midnight, everyone was called in to help with a series of villain attacks. Various teams worked to subdue that will be referred to as the Dream 'Copycats', and were finally successful between the hours of one and two in the morning. However, there was a final disaster that took place within those hours, even after all the known Copycats had been taken into custody."

Sapnap raised his hand, a thoughtful look on his face. Phil nodded in acknowledgment, pausing to let the hero speak. "You mean we don't know if we've even got all of those guys? Or if Dream was even involved in the first place?"

Heads turned back toward Phil, waiting for an answer. The man grimaced, apologetic. "I'm afraid not— we have a few staff members working through the archives as we speak, pulling up Dream's old profile and trying to compare last night's attacks to his previous patterns of

behavior,” he shrugged, at a loss. “We’re still waiting on an official decision from administrative folks higher up.”

Sapanp nodded, not seeming particularly content with that answer, but letting Phil continue with his brief nonetheless.

Phil moved on. “As you would know, Sam,” he said, nodding at the man, “Techno called Wilbur away from your scene sometime after one to address a disturbance in the Lower district. By the time Ignition arrived at the scene, an explosion hit the left side of the building he had been given the location to. Minutes later, there was a second detonation, and the building collapsed as a result. He didn’t have a chance to get inside and look for potential victims.”

Quackity let out a low whistle. “Damn.”

“I saw a bit about that on the news,” Fundy added, “Looked awful. But what does that have to do with us?”

Wordlessly, Phil picked up the stack of papers, tossing them into the center of the table. They slid, revealing two photos and a list of descriptors for each. One of the lists was significantly longer than the other. Techno swallowed, looking away.

“How much did Wilbur pay you to be here, really?”

A bright smile, something intelligent in that look, something childish, but full of life and energy.

The kid turned to Wilbur, positively grinning.

“I like him.”

He’d only known Tommy by proxy, really. But he’d liked the kid, when he’d known him. He had.

He trudged through the front door, already peeling off his cape, boots toed off by the door.

He made a beeline for the kitchen, drawn by the prospect of a snack at this hour. Upon passing by the living room though, Techno paused, stopping to process the unusual sight in front of him.

Wilbur was asleep, of all things, curled up on the couch in a position that could not have been comfortable. Tommy lay curled up next to him, forehead pushing into Wil’s shoulder, a blanket haphazardly thrown over them both.

On second thought, getting a good picture for potential blackmail material seemed like a much higher priority than a snack. Snacks could wait. Extortion could not.

The others scooped up the brief copies, passing them around. Phil waited until they’d all gotten a chance to look at the papers before getting down to the real reason why they were here.

“The pictures you see on the front of the brief are what this case has to do with us, to answer your question Fundy. The first is a picture of the Lower district’s resident vigilante, Aegis.”

“Never heard of him,” Sam murmured.

“Not surprising,” Techno responded, “Considering the Hero Guild hadn’t either, until about a week ago when the guy allegedly blew up a warehouse.”

“He wouldn’t do something like this Techno,” Wilbur ranted, pacing frantically across the living room floor. “It’s just not like him.”

“So he’s our main suspect, then?” Sam asked, squinting down at the grainy photo. “Guy doesn’t seem like much of a threat.”

“You’d think so,” Phil shot them a weary smile, glancing down at his own papers, “But yes, we have witnesses placing him at the scene of the apartment complex before both the initial explosion and collapse. Reports state that the warehouse bombing and apartment detonations contain similar signatures.”

“So what’s that got to do with this random kid?”

Techno cringed. Logically, he knew Quackity probably hadn’t seen the news, had probably gone home after last night’s fight and collapsed straight into bed. The guy definitely had no clue Tommy even existed. Techno hadn’t until only recently, when Wilbur wouldn’t shut up about the kid. Still, the casual way in which he said that, as if Tommy was just some faceless casualty, some stranger on the front page of a newspaper... it didn’t quite sit right with him.

Phil felt much of the same, based on the tense line of his shoulders. Techno wasn’t even sure if he’d met Tommy, but having to deal with Wilbur in the fallout had been plenty enough.

“That ‘random kid’ is Thomas Innit, a seventeen year old from the Lower district and a resident of the apartment building that collapsed. The police officially pronounced him dead sometime this morning.” Phil took a deep breath, eyes trained on the table in front of him. “He also happened to be Wilbur’s closest and only civilian friend.”

“Riddle me this, Techno,” Wilbur rasped, startling him.

It was well into the late hours of the morning. His brother sat, staring off into nothing, hair still hanging damp in his face after Phil had forced him to shower. It only made him look worse.

Wilbur tipped his head, letting it loll on the cushion of the couch. An empty gaze met Techno’s own. “What kind of a hero am I if I can’t even save the one person I wanted to, the one person I meant to protect?” The fog in his brother’s eyes cleared for just a second, clouds parting to reveal a question hungry for an answer. “What does that make me?”

He stared back, honestly at a loss for words. “...I don’t know.”

Wilbur blinked in surprise, before choking out a broken laugh. The sound grated on Techno’s ears. “Yeah,” Wilbur muttered, closing his eyes. “Neither do I.”

A blanket of shock fell over the room, the weight of the words *personal leave* finally sinking in. Quackity's face was white, drained of color.

"Holy shit," he whispered, eyes wide.

The reaction of the other heroes was much of the same.

Phil cleared his throat, trying to cut through the heaviness of the atmosphere. "As you can imagine, it's become a priority of the Guild and mine to bring Aegis in. You've all been invited to join the task force, partially because of your expertise in the field, and because your connections to Wilbur help us to assume you'll handle the situation with more tact than others might.

"Any questions?"

"Yeah," Sapnap broke in, still looking a bit on edge. He held up the considerably thin stack of paper, waving it lazily. "Hate to be a downer, but is this really all we've got on this Aegis guy? There's practically nothing to go off of here."

Sam nodded in agreement. "The Guild must seriously be slacking off if this guy's been hiding under the radar for this long. How hasn't anyone noticed him before this?"

Phil grimaced. "You have Wilbur to thank for that one, mate. Apparently, he's known the vigilante for about three months, and has been helping him improve his skills and chances out on the field. He even called them friends. All while refusing to report any of it."

"Well... that is one massive clusterfuck of a situation," Quackity eloquently said, scrubbing his hands through his hair to work out his nerves. "*Jesus.*"

Techno grunted in agreement.

A sliver of a smile found its way into Phil's face. "Not the way I would've described it, but it works." He clapped his hands. "Alright, here's how this is going to go. I'm going to stagger your patrol times—"

The meeting room door slammed open, startling its occupants.

"I'm not too late, am I?"

You've gotta be kiddin' me—

Wilbur stood in the doorway, hand still pressed to the glass. The smile on his face was a tad too unhinged for Techno's liking, not to mention the way he could see Wilbur's hands shaking from a toxic combination of far too little sleep and far too much coffee.

In short, his brother looked like death warmed over.

"Wil, go home. You shouldn't be here." Phil's face and tone were stony, but anyone could see the concern pooling in his eyes at the state of his youngest son.

“And miss all the action?” Wilbur laughed, voice still rough. “No fucking way!”

He dropped into the vacant seat across from Techno, slinging his feet up onto the table. “So,” he asked, breezy, like this was some sort of dinner party and not a discussion about how one of his friends has betrayed him by killing the other one of his friends. “What’d I miss?”

“You look like shit,” Techno deadpanned, ignoring the question. “Go home, Wilbur. We benched you for a reason.”

Please just take care of yourself, for once in your life.

“Your family’s right, Wilbur,” Sam cut in, “You look awful.”

“Gee, thanks, prick,” Wilbur scoffed, rolling his eyes. “It’s almost like pulling an all nighter will do that to you.”

“Wilbur, my man,” Quackity tried, “I hate to say it, but you really should—“

Quick as a flash, Wilbur yanked his feet off the table, jerking himself upright. “I should *what*, Big Q? Wait around in that silent fucking house? Stare at the ceiling, pretending that someone I thought of as a friend hasn’t just cost me fucking— *everything*? No!”

Wilbur slammed his hands down on the table, Quackity flinching back. Techno had half a piece of mind to just get up, throw Wilbur over his shoulder, and haul his insomniac ass back home. Considering the burning look in his brother’s eyes, though, that probably wouldn’t be the best idea.

“I will *not*,” Wilbur seethed, “Stand by and just let this shit happen without me. *I’m* the one who was betrayed. *I’m* the one who loved Tommy, who promised to be there for him. *I’m* the one who failed—” He abruptly cut himself off, squeezing his eyes shut. The shuddering breath that followed was loud in the stunned silence.

Wilbur opened his eyes, a determination burning in them that did nothing but make Techno more wary. “So *I’m* going to be the one to bring Aegis to justice.” Phil opened his mouth to object, but Wilbur held up a shaky hand, cutting him off. “Say whatever you want, but I won’t back down.” He narrowed his eyes. “I refuse.”

“So either help me or not, I don’t care. It’s your choice,” Wilbur cast a heavy glare around the room, leaning forward against the table, fingers splayed out against the polished wood.

“But I’m going to find him,” he declared, voice low. A challenge. A *promise*. “And you can’t fucking stop me.”

“You can’t stop me, Tubbo. I’m going out to find him.”

His roommate groaned in annoyance, running a hand down his face. Tubbo sagged further into the couch he sat upon, irritation bleeding through the fingers over his eyes. “Boo, you know that’s a bad idea-“

“He needs help-“

“No, what he *needs* is to stop blowing shit up,” Tubbo retorted, waving the TV remote around wildly, pointing at the ever-cycling news story on the screen. Their friend’s name and blurry image was permanently plastered across it, immortalized in a cherry-red banner. “He’s not only got the PD on his ass, but the entire Guild as well.”

“Exactly,” Ranboo argued, crossing his arms. “He obviously needs backup.”

Tubbo scowled. “No.”

Ranboo groaned, tugging impatiently at the front of his suit, having been halfway out the door dressed as Ender before Tubbo had thrown a fit about it.

Was it really so bad to want to check on their friend? So what if he was in a bit of legal trouble? Ranboo was allowed to be worried.

Last time A had been around, he’d not only been maskless, but paranoid and scared, as much as he’d tried to hide it. Ranboo winced even now, thinking about the nasty burns and bruises littering the vigilante’s pale face, trembling a little in the dim light in the hallway outside their apartment door. Singed hair, shaky smile, and a lot of very concerning questions about powers and how to replicate them.

“What do you have against helping him?” He pressed, unwilling to let it go. “You care about him too, I know you do.”

Tubbo’s frown lessened, eyes flicking over to the TV in front of them. He could hide it all he wanted, but Ranboo knew him too well. The crease between his brows, the way his fingers fiddled with the buttons on the remote, eyes skipping to the window every so often.

Tubbo was just as worried as he was.

“It’s not that I don’t want to go get him, Boo,” Tubbo said with a sigh, turning off the TV. With a click, the flaming building disappeared, mid-collapse for what had to be the millionth time. The room seemed oddly silent without the constant drone of the newscaster. “I just-“ his roommate shook his head, “I can’t risk it. You’re already banged up enough as it is.”

Tubbo did have a point there. The fight against the Dreams last night hadn’t been an easy one, even with both their powers used to the max, Tubbo’s stingers flying and Ranboo flitting about like crazy. There were various bruises littering their skin, a few burns, nothing atypical for a night out on patrol aside from how many there were. But at one point a stray puppet string had caught Ranboo around the neck, strangling him for a second before he worked through the shock enough to manage a teleport out of the hold. Needless to say, Tubbo had been a bit on edge, and this whole Aegis mess was not helping his nerves.

Still, irritation flared up in Ranboo's chest at the implication. Explosion or not, Aegis was their *friend*. They'd known him for months now. "You'd think he'd hurt us? C'mon Tubbo, you can't be serious--"

"No!" Tubbo cut in quickly, waving his hands in denial. "No. It's not him, it's just--" His roommate bit his lip, looking away. "I can't risk you getting hurt out there, especially if you go alone."

Oh.

Immediately, Ranboo softened, the hands fisted in the material of his suit relaxing. "Tubbo--"

Tubbo sighed again, looking back at him. "There's so many heroes out right now, and I'm sure A's got his own side of the story that we should hear," He waved a hand at Ranboo's outfit, the purple and black details that made up the familiar look of Enderwalk. "But all vigilantes are in hot shit right now, and I can't let you get caught up in it, Boo. I just can't."

Slowly, Ranboo made his way over to the couch, guilt at trying to sneak out making itself known. He knelt down beside it, pulling his anxious roommate into a hug. Tubbo gave into it easily, dropping his head onto Ranboo's shoulder.

"I'll be safe, I swear," he whispered, leaning his head onto Tubbo's, giving him an extra tight squeeze. The arms around him tightened. "But I can't leave him out there. He needs us."

"Dickhead," came the mumbled reply, the words lost in his neck. "You suck, dude. So much."

Ranboo laughed, beginning to pull away. Tubbo let him go. "Don't I know it. It's almost like you tell me that, like- constantly."

"Because it's true," Tubbo said with a shit-eating grin, "I need to make sure you remember it *somehow*."

"Ha ha, very funny."

"Just saying."

Ranboo pulled up his mask, reaching into his belt to grab the goggles Tubbo had made for him forever ago, back when they first started out. He slipped them over his eyes, blinking rapidly to adjust to the familiar red and green lenses.

"Bring him back, got it?"

Tubbo peered up at him from the couch, expression set. "Please."

Ranboo sent him a stilted salute. "You bet."

And with that, a cloud of particles filled the room and he was gone.

Tommy wasn't doing so hot.

For once, he'd be willing to admit that.

In his defense, it was cold as hell out here, and his shoulder *really* hurt where the ceiling had fallen on it. The entirety of his body ached something awful from last night's fall, lungs still shaky from dust and smoke inhalation.

And the fucking *cold*.

He'd woken up that morning stiff as a board, still crammed in the shadow of the dumpster as the grey of dawn approached. The area seemed eerily quiet in contrast to the chaos of a few hours before, most people having cleared out, the police and news stations long gone after getting all the eyewitnesses and footage they could need.

No doubt, he was a wanted man by now.

He'd pulled himself off the ground with a groan of pain, tucking his fingers in his armpits. They were worryingly numb, the exposed bits of his face stiff and chilled to the touch. Tommy pulled his hood further down, this time to try to block out the chill.

There wasn't much snow in his little alleyway, most of it having been blocked by the looming rooftops above him, but the pavement was cold enough without it. His bones ached, his shoulder screamed, and he had a pounding headache from dehydration and bawling his eyes out the night before.

Tommy had then proceeded to wander aimlessly through the Lower district.

At one point, he risked ducking inside a local cafe, desperate for any source of warmth, banking on the fact that it was still horribly early in the morning, and that no one would look too hard at him. Mask off, vest and gear tucked away on a nearby rooftop, hood pulled up and head down. Even then, eyes followed him as he ducked into the bathroom.

Shakily, Tommy turned on the tap, letting it run until it got as hot as it would. Yanking down his hood, he splashed his face, watching the grey dust swirl down the drain, mixing with flecks of dried blood. His fingers burned, pulsing with the heat of it.

Tommy risked a glance in the mirror and immediately regretted it.

Hollow, red-rimmed eyes looked back. A dark bruise bloomed across his cheek where Dream had struck him. Foolishly, he reached up and poked at it, letting out a quiet hiss at the ache that followed.

A morbid sense of curiosity suddenly overtook him, and Tommy pulled down the neck of his shirt, exposing the place where Dream's puppet strings had held him captive.

He swallowed, hard, watching the mottled lines on his neck bob up and down with the action. Quickly, he let go of the neck of his shirt, yanking the fabric a little higher, just in case.

His hair, too, was a horrendous sight. Matted with dust and bits of plaster and blood, it hung limp in his face, tips wet from the water.

In short, he looked like utter shit.

“Fuck,” he breathed, staring at his dead-eyed reflection. Knuckles turned white on the edge of the sink. “*Fuck-*”

Slamming off the water, Tommy jerked away, yanking his hood up over his face. He quickly shouldered his bag, stumbling out of the bathroom.

There was no way no one had noticed him. He looked suspicious as hell, and he knew it. Someone had probably already called the cops. God, he couldn’t deal with that, not now.

The quiet murmur of early patrons in the shop was white noise, the warmth of the cafe all of a sudden too much. Someone had turned up the TV in response to the tired chatter and a news broadcast was playing. The barista was watching with apt attention as Tommy hurried past.

“...Rather, witnesses and the authorities are blaming the tragedy on Lower’s own resident crimefighter, a vigilante that works under the name of Aegis.”

Hand on the door, Tommy froze in his tracks at the familiar name.

He risked a glance at the TV, heart in his throat as a newscaster with a stoic look read off the brief in front of them, footage of his apartment replaced with a grainy picture of him. Aegis, with the old mask, shrouded in shadow, probably taken some time ago during one of his patrols.

And then-

He sucked in a sharp breath.

It was *him*.

Tommy. His terrible photo from his work ID, stuffed in that too-small button down he’d found in the back of his closet just for that photo, half asleep. The newscaster droned on, calling for any information on Aegis’ whereabouts in order to bring justice for a young man’s death.

This is so wrong.

Dream had told him this would happen. The villain had promised to frame him, to make sure the world thought that Thomas Innit was dead.

But he didn’t think it would be so *soon*.

...Wilbur probably knew by now. There was no way he didn't.

"Poor kid," the barista muttered to herself, shaking her head at the TV screen before turning away to start another drink.

That snapped him out of it. Tommy shoved open the door, shivering at the blast of cold air and stumbling out onto the sidewalk.

He needed a place to hide, and fast. Who knows how long it would be until they sent someone after him?

Not long, it turned out.

Only a few hours later, huddling behind the commercial A/C unit of a building, hands stuffed into his armpits and shivering like crazy, he spotted the first of the heroes. Revenant. Fucking *Revenant*, of all people.

The hero only darted past, stopping to scan the rooftops for a second. Tommy watched as he pressed one finger to his ear, relaying something over the comms system before hefting his sword and continuing on to the next building.

Sure, it made sense. If Dream really had succeeded in framing him, there was no doubt that Wilbur was either heartbroken or incredibly, incredibly pissed. Probably both.

And if that was the case, Tommy was sure Wilbur only had to say the word, and Techno would be out on the streets, helping him look. The hero's presence in Lower proved it.

He shouldn't feel slightly proud about that. He *shouldn't*, not when it meant that Wilbur was hurting because of him.

(But maybe he was selfish, selfish enough to be glad he was worth hurting for in the first place.)

The moment the hero was safely out of sight, Tommy was gone.

The rest of the exhausting day followed much of the same pattern.

Stumbling through alleyways, ducking under fire escapes, holding his breath as hero after hero passed by, praying they didn't see him.

It wasn't just his criminal record on the line here.

Wilbur's life was too.

He wouldn't get caught. He couldn't afford it. Even when he caught a glimpse of the Warden across the street, or had to cram himself into a vacant doorway, metal pressing into his back until it went numb to skirt under the radar of freaking *Blaze* and his stupid little headband, it was worth it. He was fine.

It hurt to run, yes. He was incredibly thirsty and definitely some sort of hypothermic, sure. And if he had to fight to keep his eyes open, black dots dancing in the air for a split second when he stood up just a bit too fast, whatever.

He was *fine*.

And then he spotted Ignition, and it all went to shit.

Ranboo was starting to get truly worried.

Not to say that he wasn't worried before— but this was more of the doomsday variety than simple anxiety.

The sun was going down already, and the temperature with it. They had no clue if Aegis had a safe house, if he was okay, or really any clue as to where he was. At the very least, the Guild hadn't caught him yet.

The unusual swarm of heroes that had descended upon the Lower district would be enough to tell anyone that.

He slunk through the growing gloom, trying to stay out of sight, randomly teleporting here and there to throw off any tails, just in case. He checked all of their usual meet up spots, for when A called them in as backup. Nothing.

“Where are you, man?” he wondered to himself, another rooftop hideaway coming up empty.

He backed away, heading for the edge of the building. He was out of spots to even look, at this point.

The sun vanished behind the horizon.

A faint, low *pop* reached his ears, the distorted sound of a controlled blast. Ranboo's heart sank as he whirled around to face the noise.

It seemed the heroes had found a target.

Now it was just a matter of who would score a hit first.

He froze.

He was a fucking *idiot* and he *froze*.

Exposed on a fire escape, about to make the jump into the street below, and he just stopped.

Ignition stalked toward the edge of the adjacent rooftop, and even from here and through the growing dark, Tommy could tell Wilbur was a mess. For one, his hair was tangled and messy, and the hero was shaking. From a lack of sleep, adrenaline, or far too much coffee, he couldn't tell. Probably a combination of all three, knowing Wilbur.

It had only been a *day*. He shouldn't look this awful, shouldn't be falling apart so soon.

What would happen if they didn't get this shit show figured out by the end of the week? Even longer?

They'd only known each other for like a month. Sure they'd hung out constantly, and Wilbur was the closest thing to family Tommy's got at this rate, but he's— Tommy's not—

He'd been proud before, seeing Techno out looking for him. For meaning enough to Wilbur that he'd send his brother out to help get revenge, of some sorts, on his behalf.

But seeing him now?

Ignition stood on the edge of the building, shoulders hiked up to his ears, hands clenched until they shook.

I'm not worth it, Tommy nearly cried. *Please, I'm not*.

Tommy let out a shaky breath, muscles still uncooperative.

It would be so easy to just call out, to scream that *I'm here, I'm fine— stop grieving you stupid bastard, Dream is lying—*

His mouth stayed shut.
Ignition looked down.

There was a split second where neither of them moved, where Tommy pretended that he hadn't been seen. But then Ignition's eyes were narrowing, finding him through the shadows. His mouth curled up into a snarl, and the hero crouched, scooping up loose bits of cement and rock from the rooftop. Tommy had just enough time to fling up his shields before bits of gravel were raining down from the hero's hands like a hailstorm of miniature bombs.

The small blasts battered the shields, acting as a decent distraction. Ignition took advantage of it, backing up a few steps before getting a running jump. Boots slammed into the level above Tommy's head with a resounding clang. Ignition, wasting no time, gripped the rail in front of him, leaping over the side of the fire escape and swinging down at Tommy with a sweeping kick.

And just like that, they were fighting.

Tommy scrambled back a few precious inches on the slippery metal, careful to use his shields to protect himself from the onslaught. The kicks and punches just kept coming, the occasional blast nearly knocking him sideways as the hero's fingers brushed the brick wall beside them for a moment too long.

There was no way for him to fight back, not with Wilbur like this. They'd fought together often enough for him to know— when Ignition felt something personal was on the line, he pulled no punches.

Tommy fell back on his trusty backup plan: retreat. He slowly backed down down the steps of the fire escape one staggering step at a time. Ignition just kept coming, throwing projectiles and punches alike.

“How *could you?*” Ignition finally screamed, lunging forward with a nearly sloppy swing, the physical outlet of his inner turmoil proving to be insufficient. The accusation carried over the raging roar of his powers, the sting of betrayal evident enough in the tone that Tommy would've been able to pick up on the pain of it, even without seeing Wilbur's face contorted the way it was. “You fucking killed him, Red! You *killed him*—“

The words packed their own punch, raw and broken as they were, and Tommy was forced to blink back tears. He stayed silent though, simply playing the defense. Their shoes squeaked on the metal, the structure shuddering with each new impact of power upon power. Tommy quaked along with it, shoulder and other injuries crying out with each new blow. His right shield began to fracture, ears ringing with each new explosion, arms aching to the bone.

His powers weren't built to withstand this, not with his body in such ragged condition.

They hit the bottom of the stairs. Tommy took the opportunity to scramble even further back, if not just to get out of range, then to not be so close to the hurt look in the other's eyes. Ignition's next unsettled swing went wide. For a second, the fight stopped as the hero halted, glaring at him.

“You betrayed me,” Ignition seethed, hands twitching, face trapped in a snarl. All Tommy could focus on was how awfully heavy his eye bags were, even by Wilbur standards. He peered at his friend— his *brother*— through the cracked surface of his discs and tried not to cry. “We were supposed to be friends!” Wilbur cried, fists clenched. “I *trusted you!*”

And *oh*, if that wasn't a bullet to the chest.

Tommy choked on his breath, staring. Ignition stared right back, chest heaving, erratic with anger.

If I ever see Dream again, he thought helplessly, I'm gonna beat that stupid green bitch into a little green pulp.

Tommy opened his mouth, then closed it again. Ignition glared. He tried again.

“I'm sorry,” he croaked, the only thing that he could get to come out. And he was. Of course he was.

“Sorry doesn’t cut it,” Ignition hissed, hands glowing gold, power building up for another attack. “Either come with me and turn yourself in, or I’m going to make you.”

Tommy shook his head, wishing with everything he had that he *could*. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, knowing it was useless to wish Wilbur would understand, but doing it all the same, “But I can’t.”

Ignition’s face darkened, the last hope he had of trying to redeem their partnership withering before their eyes. “Fine,” he spat, glow lighting up his entire being, “Have it your way.”

With lightning speed, Wilbur snatched the lid off a nearby garbage can, the metal turning bright with heat. Tommy desperately backpedaled, going as fast as humanly possible while still holding up his discs in front for defense as the object came hurtling toward him. Even then, the explosion rocked his body, sending him flying.

Tommy hit the pavement with a pained yelp, skidding. He tried to suck in air, lungs spasming from the impact. Smoke and embers hung thick in the air, obscuring where Ignition had been from his blurry view. His discs flickered like a dying bulb, run clear through with cracks, pieces falling out in front of his eyes. He squeezed them shut, attempting to breathe through it.

Through the ringing in his ears, the sound of footsteps made themselves known.

Tommy tried to push up, to flee, but his shoulder gave out, sending him crashing back into the frigid pavement with another cry. He kicked uselessly at the pavement. The shields flickered and died, retreating back into his skin.

Someone grabbed him around the shoulders, the world dropping out from beneath him. Tommy screamed, trying to fight them off.

He couldn’t go with Wilbur. He’d *die*.

“Get the fuck away from me!” he screeched, thrashing wildly, “Let go, you fucking idiot—“

The grip only tightened, and a soft voice shushed him.

“You’re okay, A. Breathe with me, man. Deep breaths. You’re safe.”

Still struggling, Tommy pried an eye open, movements quickly dying in surprise. He was no longer surrounded by smoke. The hazy light of Ignition’s powers were gone. Instead, the violet gleam of Enderwalk’s particles flickered in the air around him, the vigilante himself holding Tommy tight, staring down at him with a worried expression.

“Wha- *End?*” Tommy rasped, utterly confused, “When did you—“

“I’ve been trying to find you all day,” Ender answered, fingers already skimming over the few of Tommy’s injuries that were readily visible. His brow furrowed further. “Obviously I wasn’t fast enough.”

Tommy gaped up at him, brain still trying to catch up to this turn of events. “I– *what?* You were looking for me?”

Enderwalk nodded distractedly, still gently fretting over him.

“*Why?*”

The fussing suddenly stopped, vigilante staring at him with wide eyes like he was crazy. “*Why?*” Ender parroted, incredulous, “You’re my friend, Aegis. I wanted to make sure you were okay. And you’re definitely not, judging by all,” a hand waved at his body, encompassing the messy state he was currently in, “*This.*”

Tommy couldn’t quite hold back a snort, relinquishing a tiny sliver of smile. “Yeah, you could say that.”

A hand pressed against the side of his head, tilting it up so Tommy could see the worry in the other’s eyes, even through the tinted goggles. He leaned into it, desperate for any sort of familiarity, now that the world was officially upside-down.

“Jesus, man. What the hell happened to you?”

Tommy swallowed hard. “You, uh– it’s– it’s a long story, big man.” He laughed shakily, trying to play it off. He fooled no one, not even himself. “You know how it is.” Tommy shrugged, and his shoulder twinged in response, making him wince.

Enderwalk’s frown deepened further, if that was even possible. “Are you alright?” He asked, hands twitching against Tommy’s face, practically dying to find some way to be helpful.

Tommy opened his mouth to answer, to boast that he was just peachy, just *wonderful*, actually, but no sound came out.

His fellow vigilante watched with ever growing concern. “...Aegis? You okay?”

No, Tommy found himself wanting to scream, to be able to cry out and be *heard* again, *I’ve lost everything, of course I’m not fucking okay.*

But Ender didn’t know about any of that, had probably only seen his face scattered across the TV and come to find him, the stupid, kind, *stupid* worrier that he was. And Tommy couldn’t tell him. He refused to risk anyone else, even if Dream hadn’t threatened End and Bee directly.

I will not lose anyone else. No fucking way.

Tommy just shook his head, eyes watering. The cold air stung.

Enderwalk decidedly didn’t push, just gathered him closer, carefully tucking Tommy’s head under his chin. The other vigilante slowly dragged the two of them to their feet and off the rough pavement, chasing away the chill.

“C’mon,” Ender murmured, supporting their combined weight, “I’ll take you home. Bee asked me to. You can explain there, if you like.”

Tommy didn’t respond, already sagging into the hold, exhausted and cold and fucking *scared*. He shivered.

“Don’t worry,” Ender reassured, voice and support keeping him grounded, “I’ve got you.”

Deep violet light filled the air, spitting particles like static.

And with that, they were gone.

Chapter End Notes

I am causing so many problems and I'm LIVING for it. Bwhahaha– get wrecked, Crimeboys. Only Alliumduo now. Alliumduo supremacy, anyone? Anyone?

Little fun fact: I've got this note in my notes app on my phone called "Martyr snippets" where I dump particularly angsty bits or banger lines that pop up into my head for later use. The little flashback w/ Techno and Wilbur in the living room is one of them. Been holding onto that "Neither do I" for *months*.

Hope y'all are doing well! Updates are still gonna be a mess, cause skiing is now in full swing and speech season is about to pick up, but I've gotten myself re-invested, so hopefully it won't be too long. (I said that last time, didn't I? Lol.)

Thanks for all the support! Love ya <3

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Bench trio time. Everyone celebrate

Chapter Notes

Yes, I know my dear Martyr readers. It's been forever. Quite literally two months as of tomorrow. Good god.

I'll put some sort of explanation in the end notes because I feel like rambling today, and I dunno. Some of y'all might be curious as to what I've got going on. But! My decently long disappearance from this work aside—

ITS TIME FOR A NEW CHAPTER MY GUYS AND GALS AND NONBINARY PALS

Have a whole bunch of random angst and then some fluff and then angst again and then fluff and probably minimal plot advancement but its Benchtrio so... who cares!

Enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tubbo was back on the couch when they teleported into the middle of the living room, gas mask on and idly scrolling through his phone.

With a startled shout, his roommate leapt off the cushions, bolting over to where Ranboo was holding Aegis up. The vigilante was leaning heavily against him, still shivering violently. He shifted his grip, making stilted movements toward the couch, careful not to jostle their battered friend.

“What—“ Tubbo started, hovering nervously beside him.

Ranboo shook his head, cutting the other off with a look over the top of A’s singed hair. *Not now*, he mouthed. Tubbo took the hint.

Gently, he lowered Aegis onto the couch, the poor guy falling into it without resistance. In the light of the apartment, he looked even worse than he had when Ranboo had first scooped him up in the alley. It wasn’t a pretty sight at all.

No longer hidden in darkness, a wicked bruise peeked out over the top edge of the new mask, no doubt incredibly uncomfortable with the hard material digging into it like that. Small knicks and burns littered any exposed skin, curtesy of Ignition's powers.

Not to mention A was still wearing his suit. Who knew what injuries they would uncover if they could convince him to take it off.

Beside them, Tubbo barely contained a grimace, worry obvious in his eyes. Ranboo's gut swam with much of the same anxiety, looking down at the vigilante. If he hadn't gotten there when he did, if Ignition had had one more projectile—

No Ranboo, he scolded himself, *We're not going to do that right now.*

"I'm going to go grab the first aid kit," he mumbled, straightening up and stepping away from the couch.

Aegis just twitched in response, hardly even a nod. His blue eyes were glassy with tears. Ranboo swallowed hard and looked away.

"I'll come with," Tubbo piped up, shuffling toward the hallway, "Grab you some clothes to change into." He waved a hand in front of his nose, trying for a playful smile. "You reek, dude."

A just sunk further into the couch, limbs afflicted by the occasional tremor. Tubbo's smile dropped. "...Right. Let's just—" His roommate turned abruptly and started off down the hall, Ranboo in tow. Tubbo didn't stop, continuing toward their shared bedroom as Ranboo ducked into the bathroom to snatch the first aid kit. He rummaged around in the cabinet under the sink, pushing aside towels and a few bottles of cleaning supplies. The kit had been tossed carelessly in the back after the fight with Dream yesterday. He grabbed it and stood back up, careful not to hit his head.

A loud clattering caught his attention, and Ranboo poked his head out of the bathroom door, muttered curses drifting out from the bedroom. He followed the sound, first aid kit tucked under his arm.

"Tubbo? You alright?"

Stepping into the bedroom, he found a tangle of hangers on the floor. Half of the closet had practically been emptied in record time, clothes scattered at Tubbo's feet. His roommate was staring down at them with a pinched expression, a sweatshirt held tight in his hands.

"None of these are going to fit him," Tubbo said, gaze still locked on the mess, "They're all the wrong size. I'm too short."

"That's fine," Ranboo assured, a bit confused as to why that was the issue here, but trying to be helpful nonetheless. He stepped closer. "I'm sure he can wear something of mine. My shirts might be a little long, but—"

Tubbo shook his head, hair flopping over his eyes as he glared at the clothes. “You don’t get it, man. They don’t *fit*.” He brandished the sweatshirt, practically shoving it in Ranboo’s face. When there was nothing but confusion in return, Tubbo huffed, yanking the sweatshirt away. “I was supposed to find him clothes that he could be comfier in. Shouldn’t be hard, right?”

Ranboo blinked, taken aback by the resentment in that statement.

“But no! Oh no, of course not—” Tubbo continued, sweatshirt now waving about wildly.

“Tubbo—”

A sleeve whipped past his face, hardly missing his cheek. “None of them fit! His dumb ass is too fucking skinny and all beaten up and I can’t fucking *do* anything!”

“Hey,” Ranboo said, breaking the tirade. He lightly touched Tubbo’s shoulder, his partner breathing heavily, his windmilling arms coming to a halt. Tubbo stared up at Ranboo with teary eyes. “Breathe, Bo. Slow down for a moment, okay?”

Tubbo blinked owlishly at him, brain taking a second to catch up to his body. And then the sweatshirt was fluttering to the floor and Ranboo had an armful of roommate, fumbling to hold both Tubbo and the first aid kit at the same time. Tubbo clung to him, face shoved into his shoulder.

“He looks really bad,” he whispered, voice wobbly. “Like, really, really bad, Boo.”

“I know,” Ranboo replied. Only minutes ago his heart had finally stopped rabbiting in his chest, the adrenaline of his search dripping away with the fading smell of smoke.

”Get the fuck away from me!”

“Trust me,” he said, “I know.”

“You don’t have any idea what happened, right?” Tubbo continued, hands fisted in the back of the Enderwalk suit. “He didn’t tell you anything?”

Regretfully, Ranboo shook his head. Tubbo sighed, pushing his forehead a little harder into Ranboo’s collarbone before pulling away. “Of course he didn’t, the stubborn bastard,” Tubbo muttered, the teensiest bit of teasing coming back to the words. “Had to go get himself beat half to death and then come here and scare the shit out of me. Inconsiderate.”

Ranboo snorted quietly, moving past Tubbo to pull a few things out of his end of the shared closet. Based on Aegis’ build, they would be a little long and somewhat loose in a couple places, but hopefully decently comfortable. The last thing the poor guy needed was tight clothes on a bunch of burns and bruises, anyway.

He tossed the clothes to Tubbo, readjusting the hold on the first aid kit. Tubbo caught them easily, bundling the sweatshirt and pants into his arms and making a beeline for the living room, Ranboo following close behind.

Aegis was right where they had left him, draped over the couch. He'd sat up somewhat, but it was like there was an invisible weight sitting on their friend's shoulders, weighing his body down. His blank gaze was fixed out the window, face shadowed by a heavily furrowed brow. Sneaking up on him, Tubbo dumped the clothes on the floor before reaching over and rubbing a hand over the wrinkles, snickering as the vigilante startled.

"Don't think so hard," Tubbo chided, "You'll get all wrinkly. Then you'll look old *and* ugly."

Aegis' eyes snapped up to Tubbo's face, crinkling at the edges ever so slightly. He pushed the offending hand away from his face. "Says you," he croaked, voice rough with smoke and the previous danger of tears, "Ugly bitch."

Aegis didn't seem to notice the way Tubbo's shoulders slumped at the comment, body practically screaming relief, but Ranboo did. The familiar insult soothed the sharp thing sitting in his own chest, keeping it from repeatedly stabbing at his lungs, piercing into his ribcage with each breath. Aegis may look awful, but it seemed like other than his injuries, he was already doing better than he was ten minutes ago in the alley.

Leaving the two to their usual back-and-forth, Ranboo took a quick detour to the kitchen to snatch a chair from the dining table. He used the time to mentally brace himself for whatever shitstorm was about to hit. There was no way they were getting out of this without answers. Aegis wasn't in the right shape to leave any time soon, and he wouldn't be, at least not without telling them something about that apartment fire. Or about why he'd had to save Aegis from being blown to high heaven by *Ignition*, of all people. Everyone who worked with A knew they had been friends.

Ignition was essentially A's mentor, from the way the vigilante spoke about him. You could tell from the tone of his voice alone; Aegis cared about Ignition. A lot.

So what on earth had happened to them?

Hopefully they'd get some answers. And if not, well. At least Aegis was alive. Not so well, at the moment, but alive. After the chaos of the past day or so, Ranboo was going to take what he could get.

He scooped up a chair and hauled it back over to the couch, settling it between Aegis' knees and sitting down as close as he comfortably could. The quiet bickering between Tubbo and A cut out, the vigilante's gaze sliding over to Ranboo's own.

"Hey," Ranboo said, pulling the first aid kit out from its spot under his arm. "Time for some healthcare, I think."

Aegis' eyes flickered down to the first aid kit, a grimace crossing his features. There was an unusual sort of wariness in the look. Not the typical "I refuse to be a burden or acknowledge that people care about me" resistance, but something deeper than that, something that Ranboo couldn't decipher. "Thanks for the offer, Big Man," the vigilante said, sitting up further and bracing himself against the couch cushions as if to get up entirely, "But I think I'm going to pass. I'll be alright. Doing just fine, as it were."

“You look like shit,” Tubbo deadpanned.

“Thanks, Bee. I feel so loved.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I really feel so adored that I might just leave while I still can—“

“Do you mind taking off your mask again?” Ranboo asked, breaking through the sarcasm as he unpacked the kit. Aegis stiffened. “I know it’s uncomfortable,” he hurriedly reassured, “But we already saw your face last time, and I really need to treat some of those cuts on your face.”

Aegis sucked in a sharp breath, eyes skittering over to the window. There was now a palpable tension in the room, one that hadn’t been there seconds before. It set them all on edge.

“You know,” Aegis began, choking out a nervous laugh, “I really do appreciate your rescue, End. Couldn’t be more grateful, truly. I’m indebted to you forever, will die for you, give you my first-born child— all the great stuff.” Ranboo watched him warily, unsure as to where this was coming from. A just kept going. “But I think I’m gonna have to head out now. Sorry.”

The vigilante suddenly lurched off the couch, pulling away from Ranboo and crawling over the couch cushions. Ranboo stared in shock as A made a mad dash for the window, stumbling on unstable legs like a baby deer.

“Oi!” Tubbo yelled, “What are you doing?!”

“Gotta go,” Aegis gasped, staggering into the window and fumbling with the latch, exhaustion visibly sapping at his limbs, making his movements sloppy.

“He’s escaping,” Ranboo pointed out, stuck in the chair, held down by his own utter disbelief. “Bee, he’s escaping.”

“I see that!”

The latch to the window clicked, and Aegis tugged it open. Tubbo finally sprung into action, darting around Ranboo and latching on right as A stuck a leg through the window. The vigilante let out an undignified shriek as Tubbo yanked him back into the room.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Aegis yelled, thrashing wildly. “Let me go, you dickhead!”

“No!” Tubbo yelled back, dragging the two of them away from the window. “Stop trying to get yourself killed and just let Ender treat you!”

“No!” Aegis shrieked again, attempting to get back to the window. He ripped out of Tubbo’s grip, making a lunge for the half-opened thing. Tubbo jumped forward and tackled him, both of them slamming into the floor with a thud that made Ranboo wince in sympathy. No doubt Aegis felt that one. He got up from the chair, setting down the first aid supplies and inching around the feebly writhing mass to go close the window.

“Just take the damn mask off!”

“Fuck you!”

“God, you stubborn—“

Another wordless yell, although quieter this time, more exhausted.

“Why are you so bad at letting people help you?” Tubbo shouted, pinning their friend to the floor. Aegis thrashed, trying to buck him off, but his breath was labored, kicks not even landing anymore, face screwed up in pain. Ranboo paused by the window, watching in fascination as Tubbo reached up to pull off the mask. Aegis’ limbs were taut as wire, as if Tubbo were going to kill him.

“Please don’t,” Aegis croaked out, trying a different approach now that physically fighting his way out had fallen through. Tubbo faltered, fingers already hooked around the straps of the mask. “I— you can’t take it off. It’s not safe. Just— don’t.”

“Chill dude,” Tubbo said sincerely, “We’re not gonna hurt you. I don’t care what the Guild is saying about you right now, if that’s what you’re worried about. It’s all a load of shit anyway.”

Aegis shook his head, still trying to get away from Tubbo’s hands. “That’s not what I meant. My face—“

“Nothing I haven’t seen before,” Tubbo shrugged, tugging the straps from his ears. “It’s not like we’re gonna know who you are.”

“Bee please— *don’t*—“

A gust of cold air hit Ranboo’s back. He shivered, turning away from the scuffle to tug the window shut, latching it firmly closed.

“See? You’re just fine. Now just let Ender baby you and—“ Tubbo abruptly cut himself off.

Ranboo looked back to see Tubbo frozen above Aegis, mask held limply in his hands. A’s eyes were screwed tightly shut to the point where it almost seemed painful. Ranboo was startled to notice the faint shine of a tear tracking down his cheek. He took a step forward, already flooded with concern.

Had Tubbo crossed a line? Oh god, please don’t tell them Aegis had some sort of trauma with this that they didn’t know about—

“I fucking knew that guy looked familiar,” Tubbo muttered, still staring down at Aegis’ unmasked face. “I— shit.”

Aegis’ chest hiccupped with a silent sob and Tubbo scrambled to get off him, moving to kneel on the floor instead. Ranboo approached, confused as to just what the heck was going on right now. He knelt down on A’s other side, looking over at Tubbo and silently trying to ask what the hell he did to make their friend cry.

Tubbo just gestured vaguely at his face, which was looking rather shocked, before nodding at where Aegis was sprawled between them.

Ranboo followed the gesture, looking down at A's face. It wasn't anything new— pale, covered in scrapes and that nasty bruise. If anything, it looked worse than the last time he patched it up. But then the features beneath the blotchy map of injuries registered, and Ranboo was sure his face was just as shocked as Tubbo's.

The face between them was the same one that had been plastered on the tv. Same eyes, same blond hair, same cheeks with the few freckles and hidden dimples that Ranboo was sure would appear if he were to smile. The face between them belonged to Aegis, yes. But it also belonged to a teenager by the name of Thomas Innit, who according to the morning news had been declared dead last night.

"You're him," Ranboo stated. He didn't elaborate.

They all knew what he meant.

Aegis' eyes stayed firmly shut, another tear creeping down his face, limbs curling into themselves as if to hide.

"I can't believe I didn't realize before," Tubbo complained, looking frustrated with himself. "I mean— we literally saw you like a week ago! I should've figured it out sooner."

Ranboo frowned. "Figured out what?"

Tubbo waved a hand at Aegis, who was lying stiff between them, not making a sound. "That Aegis, who is currently laying on our floor, was blamed for the death of Thomas Innit, who is also currently laying on our floor. The fucking Hero Guild is hunting him down for killing *himself*." Tubbo scoffed. "Which obviously, he didn't do."

Ranboo blinked. He— he had honestly not made that connection yet.

No wonder he's so wrecked after having to fight Ignition. The heroes are hunting him down for something he didn't even do. God.

He glanced down at their friend, plagued by more questions than ever. But faced with the silently distraught face below him, Ranboo decided those questions could wait.

"A?" He spoke quietly, worried. "Can you look at us?"

There was no response.

"...Aegis?"

The vigilante didn't move, chest lurching with the occasional soundless hiccup.

Ranboo bit his lip, carefully reaching out to grab one of Aegis' hands, busted knuckles and all, hoping he wasn't making things worse.

“Uh...Thomas?” He glanced at Tubbo, unsure, and got an encouraging nod in return. He continued on. “Are you— are you okay?”

Finally, *finally*, Aegis cracked his eyes open, meeting Ranboo’s own. Ranboo couldn’t help but be taken aback by the emotion in them. The look was inexplicably sad, something filled with grief. It looked as if A were mourning something.

As if... as if Aegis were mourning *him*.

“Sorry for using your identity like that,” he continued, trying to fill the space, to distract from that painful expression, “I won’t do it again. We’re just a little shocked and you weren’t responding, so I—“

“You can call me Tommy.”

“...What?”

“Tommy,” Aegis repeated, moving to sit up. The grief had left his face, replaced by a frankly depressing look of resignation that had absolutely no place being there. “That’s my actual name. Haven’t gone by Thomas in years.”

A was sitting fully now, legs tucked close to his chest. Without the mask, the bruising looked even worse.

He didn’t let go of Ranboo’s hand.

“Makes me sound like some kind of pretentious asshole. I prefer Tommy.”

“...Alright.”

Ranboo shared another glance with Tubbo, unsure where to go from here. His roommate jerked his head toward the couch, where the first aid kit sat abandoned. Right. Still definitely in need of medical attention, even after a failed escape attempt.

Wordlessly, Tubbo scooted forward and slipped an arm under A’s shoulders, Ranboo mirroring the action. Aegis let them haul him to his feet without protest. Now that the mask had been lost, it seemed his objections to them treating his injuries were gone.

They settled him back down in his original position, Ranboo picking up where he left off, Tubbo perched on the arm of the couch. The room fell silent as he worked, only broken by the occasional hiss of pain from the dab of disinfectant and Ranboo’s eventual instruction for Aegis to strip off his jacket, vest, and shirt. The vigilante stuck out a half-hearted middle finger, but complied anyway, tossing aside the first two items and leaving the top hanging around his neck like a scarf.

Ranboo couldn’t help but cringe in sympathy at the sight of A’s chest. It was bruised from what looked like a kick or someone stomping on his stomach, and sliced through with little nicks and burns from whatever projectile Ignition had launched at him. Not to mention the slight wonkiness of his shoulder, which Ranboo ended up having to put in a makeshift sling of bandages.

By the time he was finishing up, the first aid kit was nearly emptied out, and Aegis looked more like a walking Band-Aid ad than a person.

“So... Tommy,” Tubbo began, trying out the new name and breaking the heavy silence. “Is there a particular reason why you’re being framed for your own murder right now? Or why you’ve apparently taken up a hobby of blowing up buildings?”

Aegis, or well—*Tommy* now, considering he was out of the suit—sighed over Ranboo’s hair. “Yes.”

Tubbo paused, waiting for him to continue.

He did not.

“You wanna elaborate on that, Boss Man, or...”

Tommy sighed again, shaking his head. “I can’t. I’ve already fucked up enough by letting you guys see my face. Knowing that Tommy isn’t dead— I’ve already been selfish enough to put you in that much danger.” He scowled. “I’m not losing anyone else.”

Tubbo sat forward, peering at him. “What do you mean, losing anyone else? Did someone—“

“I’m not talking about it.”

“We can help.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Yes we can.”

“No, Honeybee, you *can’t*.”

“You’re not selfish,” Ranboo contributed, plastering on the last bandage. He sat back in the chair, fixing Tommy with a look. “Letting us help you isn’t selfish.”

If anything, Tommy’s scowl only deepened, and he crossed his arms stubbornly. “It is if it gets you killed. All I’ve managed to do is paint a massive target on your backs.”

Tubbo scoffed, rolling his eyes. “I think we can handle the Guild and the police, dude. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Then what *are* you talking about?” Tubbo snapped, stressed and confused. “Because you’re sitting here, beat to shit on my couch, and acting like you’ve got someone holding a gun to our heads!”

Tommy cringed, defensiveness dropping away into something more pleading. “Bee—“

“Look, Tommy,” Tubbo leaned forward, elbows pressed against his knees, a fierce look in his eye. “I’m not saying you have to spill all your secrets. I get it. We’re vigilantes— it comes with the job. You think you have to do this shit alone because someone insisted you do, and now you’re trying to pretend that it’s not breaking you up inside.”

Tommy opened his mouth, but Tubbo cut him off. “Don’t pretend that you weren’t just sobbing on our living room floor and looking at us like we’re dead men walking.”

“Or having a breakdown in an alley before I teleported us here,” Ranboo helpfully added. “After I had to rescue you from being nearly killed by some guy you told us was your friend.”

Tommy cringed, and Tubbo cast him a curious glance at that comment. Ranboo waved him off. *Later*, he mouthed.

Tubbo nodded, continuing with his speech. “That too, whatever that means. All we’re saying here is that you can trust us, A. I don’t care if it means I might get a bullet through the brain. You’re our friend, you fucking idiot. Let us help you.”

Tommy blinked, staring up at Tubbo, obviously trying to process the words. He gaped, opening and closing his mouth. For a second, he teared up again. Then the tiniest of smiles settled on his face. “...Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Tubbo gave him a loving pat on the head before getting up off the armrest. “Now I’m going to go make you some tea, because you sound like shit and you’re shivering again.”

Sure enough, Tommy was trembling slightly. Probably from sitting shirtless for the better part of an hour in a room where the window had been open for a good five minutes in the middle of December, all without having properly warmed up in the first place.

“Oh crap—” Ranboo apologized, feeling like an idiot, “I’ve got clothes for you, hold on—”

Ranboo leaned over and snatched up the forgotten sweats and hoodie from the ground. He sat back up and held out the hoodie, waiting for Tommy to pull the torn-up shirt from around his neck in case he needed help. He didn’t, carelessly tossing it aside with the rest of his gear and snatching the offered clothes.

Ranboo froze.

He stared at Tommy’s exposed neck, heart dropping into his stomach, fingers sinking into the sweatpants still in his grip. The other teen didn’t notice, busy trying to wriggle into the sweatshirt with only one free arm.

“...Tommy,” he said slowly.

“Yeah?”

“You didn’t leave your territory the other night, right?”

“Of course not,” Tommy’s head finally surfaced, poking out of the hole of the sweatshirt, one side all bunched from his sling, barely over his shoulder. “I was busy blowing up my apartment, remember?”

“...Then where did you get that?”

Confused, Tommy glanced down at himself, unable to see what Ranboo was pointing at. “Get what?”

“That bruise on your neck.”

Tommy stilled, apparently remembering the injury Ranboo was referring to.

“I thought none of the Copycats were in your section of Lower,” Ranboo continued. “They were all to the North and West, except for the one in Central.”

Ranboo watched as Tommy opened his mouth, panic in his eyes.

What is he so afraid of?

“There weren’t,” Tubbo piped up from the kitchen, coming back over, mug in hand. “I checked Guild reports earlier when you were out, Ender. Even the confidential ones. There were no known Copycats in his area.”

They both turned to look at Tommy, who had gone entirely pale. If anything, he looked worse than he had when Tubbo had taken his mask off. His mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

And ever so slowly, Ranboo’s brain began kicking into overdrive, puzzle pieces falling into place to make one very, very ugly picture.

“Tommy,” Ranboo said, catching his petrified gaze. “When did you get in a fight with Dream?”

For a second, Tommy’s eyes went impossibly wider, before he began shaking his head and blurting out, “I have no clue what you’re talking about, End. I haven’t been in a fight with Dream.” He waved a hand at Tubbo. “Like Honeybee said, there weren’t any Copycats around for me to fight.”

Ranboo stared at him. Tommy’s words died out, having recognized that Ranboo didn’t believe him for a second.

Wordlessly, Ranboo reached up and pulled down the neck of the Enderwalk suit, exposing his throat and the bruising upon it. The bruising that, compared to the one on Tommy’s neck, looked awfully similar. The bruising that he’d gotten only last night, courtesy of a neon green puppet string.

Bruising that by all logic, Tommy shouldn’t have.

Tommy stared at Ranboo’s neck. Ranboo and Tubbo stared at Tommy.

“...Fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

Would'ya look at that– they've connected the dots. Also! A little note about Tommy's behavior in this bit, cause it might seem odd that he just got out of a fight where he nearly got murdered by Wilbur and is now acting far too calm: poor guy is just totally in shock. Compartmentalizing all of the emotions at the moment. Definitely trying to process and doing a horrible job of it so he's just throwing himself out windows and all that lovely stuff instead.

But don't worry, he's got the boys now to help him. He'll be okay. Eventually.

Now– on to why it's taken me like a million years to update this:

I've been a bit busy lately. Picked up some old hobbies of mine again, like this cool thing called “sleeping” and this other neat trick I like to call “being only somewhat mentally ill”.

Dare I explain? Shall I perhaps be vulnerable for a minute? I think so.

Basically, writing for this fandom has been a coping mechanism of mine for over a year now. Last year was ass. I was lonely, tired, and overall not having a great time and I had no way to express any of that. Naturally, I turned to writing fan fics (you know, as one does). I've basically been fueling a good portion my writing with my emotions and stress and all that lovely shit as a way to process and find a somewhat healthy way to dump all of it. Don't get me wrong, I've had an incredibly fun time writing and talking to all of you, but that wasn't the only reason for doing this.

What I'm getting at is that I've had a hard time writing lately because it's a coping mechanism I haven't really needed. I've got way less school related stress now that my classes have switched with a new semester, I'm overall feeling mentally less like shit. I've been vibing my way through life and having a decent time of it for once, and in return, writer's block has been a bitch.

I'm not gonna give up on this story, or my writing in general. It's become too big a part of me for that. I just know this is the longest gap in all of my works so far and I wanted to share why. A big thanks to everyone for sticking around this long, and I'll see you on the next chapter, whenever that may be :)

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Hey! I'm back! Look at that!

I could say the whole "sorry it's been forever, my bad, please forgive me" thing, except honestly, if anyone is shocked that it took a whole month for another update, that one is on you. We've all been here before. Welcome to the mess that is my page.

Anywho— did someone say plot advancement? And angst? Abso-fucking-loutely I did.

Enjoy! :)

TW: Grief, a very brief, non-graphic bit of injury description

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“You’re telling me you fought *Dream* by yourself and didn’t come to us right away?” Honeybee shouted, upset. “He could’ve killed you!”

“You think I don’t know that?” Tommy snapped defensively, curled up on the couch. He pointed at the bandages around his neck, the sling on his arm. “Why the fuck do you think I look like this?”

“Because you’re too fucking stupid to ask for help when a literal murderer attacks you! I can’t believe—“

“Guys—“

“Shut the fuck up, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tommy spat. “I couldn’t ask for help, there was no one who could help me.”

“What do we look like to you?” Bee shot back, gesturing wildly between Ender and himself. “Useless civilians? End literally pulled you out of a fight like an hour ago!”

“*Guys—*”

“That’s not what I’m talking about, you dumb bitch! I meant that—“

“You meant what? That you’re too stupid and blind to take one damn look at who’s standing in front of you?”

“*Guys!*”

“I’m not fucking stupid! Maybe I didn’t want to get anyone killed because of my selfishness, huh? Ever think of that Honeybee?” Tommy snarled. He felt like a caged animal, cornered and ready to lash out at anyone he could. “I already lost my best friend because of that bastard and I’m not losing you guys too, okay? So just fucking *drop it* already!”

Bee went quiet, looking stricken. Ender too, fell silent, his attempts to get between the fighting coming to a halt.

“...What?” Bee asked in a small voice. Tommy curled into himself, hiding his face behind his knees. He was *not* going to cry right now. Absolutely not. “Dream—“

Tommy felt his throat close up, tears welling in his eyes. He pressed into his knees harder, despite how uncomfortable the position was with his bound arm. “I don’t want to talk about it. Get the fuck away from me.”

“Tommy—“ Ender began.

“Shut the fuck up,” he whispered, tears threatening to leak down his cheeks. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Hesitant footsteps approached him. The couch sagged, and slowly, gently, a pair of arms encircled him. Tommy went rigid, but didn’t push away.

“I’m sorry,” End whispered, holding onto him. “I’m so sorry, Tommy.”

“He’s not dead,” Tommy choked out, taking deep, shaking breaths. He was strong, he could handle it. He was not going to have a pathetic little breakdown in front of his fellow vigilantes, not when they’d already had to deal with his panicked response to them trying to take off his mask. That was bad enough. “Not yet. Not if I don’t fuck up.”

“What did Dream do?” Bee asked hesitantly, hovering over them. Tommy winced. “I don’t— if your friend isn’t dead, then...”

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut, leaning into End’s chest against his better judgment. He couldn’t tell them, shouldn’t tell them. He could get Wilbur killed. He could get *them* killed.

But he was selfish, and he was sick of being alone, even if it had only been a day.

A day is a long time, when you’re hurting. A day is a long time when you’re grieving a friend you haven’t even lost yet. A day is a long time when you’re tired and in pain, and all you want is to go home. To be safe. To be held and for someone to tell you it was going to be okay, because when you said it yourself, it isn’t very believable.

All he wanted was for it to be okay.

Was that too much to ask?

Maybe not. Maybe he didn’t care anymore. Maybe he didn’t have the energy.

“You guys know how I’m friends with Ignition, right?” Tommy began, voice hardly more than a whisper.

“That’s what you said,” Bee replied, sounding upset. “Which we believed, until he tried to fucking kill you.”

“Bee,” End admonished, carefully rubbing Tommy’s back, mindful of the bandages and bruises.

“Sorry,” Bee muttered.

“I still am,” Tommy continued quietly. “Or– was. Want to be. I–“ He hiccuped, chest spasming. “Dream was waiting for me, in my apartment. He– he knew who I was. Under my mask.”

There was a sharp intake of breath.

“A–“

“I’m not done.”

The two fell silent again, inviting him to keep going. Tommy wasn’t sure he wanted to. End didn’t let go.

He changed tracks. “About a month ago, I met this guy at work, Wilbur. He was a right dickhead.” Tommy laughed, the poor sound wet and sad. “We became friends. Good friends. He really cared about me, and I–“ He stopped, shaking his head. “Turns out, I’d just become best friends with Ignition’s civilian identity, and hadn’t even realized it.”

“And no,” Tommy said, stopping the question he knew was coming based on Bee’s intake of breath. “He doesn’t know who I am.”

“So then why…?”

“Apparently, that warehouse they framed me for blowing up the other week was Dream’s. He said I’d wrecked his plans, or some shit. Needed me out of the way. So he told me if I didn’t fake my death as Tommy, if I told anyone or didn’t get out of his way, he’d– he said he would–“ Tommy’s voice died. He shook his head, unable to continue.

“He said he would kill Wilbur,” Ender finished for him, sounding heartbroken. “Jesus Christ, that’s awful. And you’ve just been on your own since that apartment blew up?”

“My apartment,” Tommy corrected, still on the verge of tears. “And yes.”

“Let me get this straight,” Bee started, sounding downright murderous. Tommy pried his eyes open to look at him, surprised by the tone. “You’re telling me that in the past 24-something hours you got attacked by the most notorious, merciless villain in this city’s history, were threatened with death of your closest friend, lost your house, got chased around the city by heroes for the entire day, and then that same friend came along and beat the absolute shit out of you without knowing that it was you?”

Tommy laughed shakily. It sounded absolutely absurd, put like that. “Pretty much.”

Bee just stared at him.

Tommy stared back. He offered a watery smile. “It, uh– kinda sucks, a-actually.”

Bee lunged at him, and before Tommy could even react, he was entirely wrapped up in the hold of both vigilantes. Both of his friends.

Ender tugged him closer, shifting to make room for Bee on the couch. Bee took it gladly, practically smushing himself into Tommy’s side, trying to get as close as possible without hurting him.

“You didn’t deserve that,” Bee said, adamant. “You didn’t deserve any of the things that happened to you. Neither did Wilbur.”

“And you’re not selfish,” Ender chimed in. “I don’t care how many times I have to say it. What you did for Wilbur proves it.”

“But I told you guys,” Tommy whispered, voice wobbling. “You’re going to get hurt, and it’s all going to be my fault.”

Bee shook his head, pressing his forehead into Tommy’s shoulder. “Even if we did, we trust you. You’re worth it.”

Tommy laughed again, and it hurt. He smiled at them painfully. “I don’t even know your names. How can that make sense?”

Bee pulled back, seemingly realizing he still had his gas mask on. Ender came to much of the same conclusion.

Tommy didn’t blame them– identities were sacred. They had no obligation to tell him anything. But they had whole lives that he didn’t know about, lives he could be ruining and had no idea.

How was that right?

Ender and Bee shared a glance, then a nod.

And before Tommy’s very eyes, they both let go of him and took their masks off, letting him see their full faces for the very first time. Tommy gaped.

Bee smiled at him. “Hey Tommy, I’m Tubbo.” He caught one of Tommy’s hands and gave it a squeeze. “Nice to meet you.”

Tommy couldn’t speak.

“And I’m Ranboo,” End said, smiling at him.

Tommy couldn’t breathe.

Why the fuck would they– why did they–

He hadn't meant for them to do that. He hadn't meant–

“Why...?” he gasped, staring at them. It was all he could say.

Bee– *Tubbo* shrugged, squeezing his hand. “Like I said. You're worth it.”

And Tommy?

Tommy cried.

“So you're telling me the only thing he talked about was the warehouse and your faked martyrdom? Nothing else?”

“It's not like he just showed up and was like ‘Here is a detailed, step-by-step list of how I plan to take down the Hero Guild once and for all.’ He kicked my ass, told me to die, and then dipped.”

“And what if that fell through? He had to have some sort of back-up plan, right?”

Tommy shook his head. “Listen, man. You didn't see him face to face. Dream doesn't *do* back-up plans.”

After Tubbo and Ranboo had helped Tommy through his breakdown, the three vigilantes had decided to move on to their course of action when it came to dealing with this shitshow. Tubbo decided that their best choice would be to figure out what Dream was going to do next now that Tommy was supposedly out of the picture. And that apparently included pouring over every second of his interaction with Dream.

Tubbo threw up his hands in exasperation. “So he's a fucking super villian, so what? If he's as perfect at villany as you say, Dream isn't about to have his whole life's work banking on Wilbur *maybe* taking you out in a fit of rage.”

“I wouldn't put it past him,” Tommy mumbled, rubbing the bruise on his neck. “Guy is a right bastard.”

“Are you sure he didn't slip up and mention what he was going to do next?” Ranboo questioned, brows furrowed. “You interrupted his original plan to make Ignition look bad by using up that dose in the warehouse. So he's gotta have a next move or something.”

Tommy shifted on the couch, wincing with the movement. He sighed, sinking into the soft cushions. His whole body ached, from the tips of his toes to the hairs on his head. Stupid green asshole and his drug empire.

Stupid Wilbur for kicking his ass and breaking his heart. And possibly a rib or two. Passionate, idiotic dickhead.

He missed him.

“Look, all I remember from his fancy villain monologue was him slamming me against the wall, raving about heroes and the media, then a boot stomping the shit out of my chest before he threatened to— to, uh,” Tommy stammered, grip tight on the mug in his hands, “to kill Wil,” he finished quietly.

It felt worse, putting it into words, saying it out loud. As if telling someone finally made it real, despite the very tangible injuries littering his skin.

The words felt like acceptance. Tommy resented it.

Tubbo and Ranboo sat in contemplative silence, taking the information in. Tommy finally took a sip of his tea, struggling to lift it to his lips with one of his arms trapped inside the borrowed sweatshirt. Not to mention the faint tremors of exhaustion that still shook his fingers, even after the cold had already leached from his skin.

The tea was peppermint, probably left over from the holidays. Honestly, it tasted kind of like shit. He’d never really liked tea, especially not peppermint. But the warmth also tasted a little bit like being loved, so he drank it anyway.

It sat in his stomach, smooth and warm and definitely tasting like shit, and Tommy wanted to cry. Again.

He wanted Wilbur.

He wanted to go home.

“You said media, right?” Ranboo asked, peering up at Tommy from where he was slouched on the floor, having moved away earlier to give him some space to breathe. “As in, the press?”

“That’s what I assumed, yeah,” Tommy frowned. “Why?”

“Well,” Ranboo dragged out, piecing his thoughts together, “If Dream’s goal is to ruin Ignition in the face of the public, due to Ignition’s reputation as being the city’s only hero who cares about the Lower district—”

“Not like he’s wrong,” Tubbo muttered.

“True. But maybe,” Ranboo said, sitting up straighter, “Maybe, this whole blackmail situation isn’t just to get you, a threat to his goals, out of the way. Maybe it’s not completely personal. Maybe he’s pitting you and Ignition against each other on purpose, because having you two fight as supers is *exactly* what he wants.”

Tommy squinted at him, trying to make sense of the words. “What are you getting at?”

“I mean,” Ranboo said, jumping to his feet in his excitement, the others’ eyes tracking him as he paced. “He didn’t just hurt your relationship with Wilbur as a way to get back at you, or to

possibly get you killed. If he'd wanted to, Dream could've killed you in your apartment the other night, and no one would've been able to do anything about it."

Tommy winced, hating that Ranboo was right.

He had been helpless, pinned to the floor, boot on his chest. Trapped.

If the villain had wanted him dead, he would be.

Ranboo had a point.

Why *was* he still here, alive and breathing on the duo's lumpy couch?

"So what I'm thinking is," Ranboo continued emphatically, "Dream used Wilbur against you not because he's Wilbur, but because he's Ignition. Think about it: he's out of the drugs he needed to fool the media into thinking Ignition's gone rogue. Whatever timing he was planning for has been ruined, both by the loss of the doses and his ability to mass produce more. So he does the next best thing.

"Instead of tricking the press into thinking Ignition's lost control," Ranboo finished grimly, "He makes sure Ignition really does."

A heavy silence fell over the trio as the words sank in.

The very idea of it made Tommy's gut churn, but he had to admit Ranboo might as well be right. It made an awful amount of sense.

"There's a slight flaw in that theory, Boo."

They both turned to look at Tubbo, who was fiddling with the wrappers left over from Tommy's excursion in healthcare and scowling at the floor. "If Dream really wanted the media to turn against Ignition for beating the shit out of Aegis, he was banking on way too much sheer luck. Tommy nearly got mugged in an alley only a couple of hours ago without any witnesses."

"He's got a point," Tommy shrugged, taking another sip of his tea and cringing at the taste. "If you hadn't been there to pull me out, End... let's just say you'd be seeing my death on the news for the second time."

Ranboo's face paled, uncomfortable with the reminder of how close he'd cut it. "Yeah," he choked out. "That... wasn't so great."

"Thanks for that, by the way," Tommy said over the lip of his mug. He caught Ranboo's eyes, sincere. "Genuinely. I—" He shook his head. "I'd be fucked without you guys. Just— thanks."

"You're welcome," Tubbo smiled softly at him, looking almost like he wanted to go in for a hug, but was working incredibly hard to restrain himself, which Tommy appreciated. He didn't think his bones would enjoy it very much.

Ranboo nodded in agreement. "I meant what I said before, A. You can trust us."

Tommy cleared his throat, finding himself choked up. He bent over to try to set the mug on the floor, letting out a low grunt of pain as he did so.

“Gimme that,” Tubbo scolded, snatching it from his hands. “Idiot.”

Tommy rolled his eyes, falling back into the couch. “Back to what Boo Boy here was saying. Why the fuck am I not dead, and even more importantly, why is my best– w-why is *Wilbur*,” he stuttered, hastily correcting himself. *You already had a breakdown, get your shit together.* “Not making any headlines?”

“It’s not like Dream can orchestrate where you guys fight,” Tubbo pointed out, drinking the rest of Tommy’s tea. *Gross.* “He can’t exactly force you to meet up where there’s good media coverage. It’s not like he can just stage a fight somewhere noticeable.”

“...Unless he could.”

“Huh?”

“Tommy,” Ranboo was looking at him with an intense look on his face, the sort of look that one gets when they know they’re right when they really, really want to be wrong. Tommy did not like that look. “Can you summon your discs for me?”

“What?” Tubbo interrupted, incredulous. “What do you need him to use his powers for? He’s messed up enough as it is!”

“Tubbo’s right,” Tommy admitted, “I’m exhausted. I doubt I could pull up both even if I tried, especially with my arm all fucked.”

“Then just summon one, if you can. Please, dude. It’s important. Trust me.”

There was that word again.

Trust.

It’d been thrown around a lot, recently.

”I trusted you!”

He flinched at the memory of Wilbur’s hurt.

But still, these two weren’t Wilbur. End and Bee had saved his ass plenty of times. They’d even been willing to reveal themselves just to make him more comfortable. If there was anyone he could trust right now, *should* trust right now, it was Ranboo.

He nodded. “I’ll warn you, though, this is gonna be rough.”

With gritted teeth, Tommy squeezed his eyes shut, dragging his powers forth from under his skin. The energy protested, tugging itself back, unwilling to surface with the tiredness that weighed down his limbs. It was like his body was fighting itself, trying to prevent him from

hurting anything further. He didn't let up though, even as the power protested, dragging through his veins, throwing a fit the entire way out.

With a gasp, he felt his left disc activate, hovering in front of him. He pried his eyes open, cringing at the sight of the sickly red light, the shield flickering pathetically.

"Ta-da," he breathed, beginning to sweat with the effort of maintaining it. "My pride and joy."

Ranboo didn't take the bait, didn't laugh, too busy examining the disc with a furrowed brow.

"What're you looking for, Ranboo?" Tubbo asked, hovering over his shoulder.

Ranboo sighed, face grim. "That," he said, pointing to a spot near the outer edge of the shield that had taken a particularly hard hit from Ignition's debris. There was a chunk missing, chipped out, fractured away. It would return with time, of course, once Tommy got some decent rest and healed up a bit.

But that's not why Ranboo looked so worried. Tommy understood.

The missing pieces of the shield had obviously been left behind at the scene of the fight with Wilbur. Those few ruby shards meant that for the first time in weeks, probably months, Aegis had been weakened enough to leave behind a trace, maybe even multiple.

"Well, that's not great, is it?" Tubbo chirped as the shield dissolved, Tommy unable to maintain it any longer.

"No," Ranboo responded. "It most definitely is not."

The sun was setting.

It was a lovely sight, all pinks and powdered blues, framing the city skyline.

Wilbur's feet dangled over the edge of a building, swinging gently in the air. He tugged at the sleeves of his sweater, pulling them down over his hands. Why, he wasn't sure. The air was warm tonight, comfortable, even without Ignition's costume.

It was nice. Peaceful. Still.

No sirens, no smoke. No cameras and clean-up crews in sight. Everything was pristine, perfect. The city was entirely whole and untouched, unbothered. Hell— he didn't even have his pager on him. That was practically a miracle in itself.

Wilbur wanted to enjoy it, he did. He could feel his own exhaustion, body pulled down by a weight greater than gravity, a pressure he couldn't put a name to. If that feeling alone were any indicator, he definitely could use a moment of this stillness.

And yet— the world felt *off*. Crooked. Off-balance.

Like he was missing something and had already forgot what he'd forgotten.

A pigeon cooed nearby. Its silhouette bobbed on the building next door, leaping off the edge in a flutter of feathers, swooping over the rooftops. Unconsciously, Wilbur's hands tightened around the sleeves in his hands.

Cars crawled by on the street below. He counted them with interest, like a child hovering over an anthill. People were making their way home from work, traversing the streets under the fading pastel of the sky. Above them all, he breathed.

"*Shit*, it's nice out here."

Wilbur jerked, head snapping around at the voice so fast it hurt.

Tommy let out a low whistle, stuffing his hands in his pockets while he gazed out over the city with a crooked grin. A puff of wind rustled his hair, the dusk coloring his cheeks. He looked happy. "Sure beats all that time cooped up in the library. Night shifts are so *boring*."

With a contented sigh, Tommy plopped down next to him, legs swinging in an imitation of Wilbur's. "Can't believe we haven't tried this rooftop sunset thing before." He playfully nudged Wilbur's shoulder with his own. "Considering how big of a romantic you are 'n all."

Wilbur blinked at him, still startled by the sudden appearance, but Tommy's smile encouraged him to relax. He chuckled, gently nudging the teen back. "Says the kid who gave me a book of his favorite poems as a holiday gift."

Tommy sniffed, turning his nose up in the air. The last rays of the sun caught his hair, lighting it up like a dying halo. "You just don't know how to appreciate good literature, dickhead. That shit is sophisticated and you know it."

"I don't know it," Wilbur pointed out. "I've hardly read it yet."

Tommy gasped, scandalized. "I give you a heartfelt, personal gift, and you don't even *read* it?" He shook his head, mock heartbreak on his face. "For shame, Wilbur Soot. For shame."

"Hey, it's not like I've had a lot of time!" Wilbur protested, throwing his hands in the air. "The holidays aren't really even over yet. It's only been—" He trailed off, brow furrowing in confusion. "It's only been..."

That was odd. He couldn't seem to remember.

"You good, Wil?"

Cars sped by below them, their headlights foggy blurs. Wilbur shook his head, trying to clear it.

...Why couldn't he remember?

"Wil?"

“How long has it been since the holidays?” Wilbur asked slowly. “I can’t seem to remember.”

Tommy shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m absolutely shit with time now.”

Wilbur stopped, staring down at the cars whipping past, practically streaks of light by now. The wind blew a little bit stronger, a little bit hotter.

“...What?” He choked out.

“Oh, you know,” Tommy continued casually. “When you’re out of time, you tend to lose track of it.”

Something settled on his cheek. Shakily, Wilbur reached up to brush it away. He stared at the ash streaking his fingertips. The next puff of wind reeked of smoke.

“I’m only seventeen, right?”

Wilbur’s hands were shaking. His sweater was gone, replaced by his suit.

The sun had set.

“I was supposed to have more time, Wil.” Tommy’s voice cracked, words suddenly rough, like his voice was worn from screaming. From choking on dust. “Why— why don’t I have more time?”

Wilbur stiffened, risking a glance at his friend, at his Tommy, heart in throat.

The teen stared back at him, wide-eyed. Like magic, the ash settled in Tommy’s hair, coating it in gray plaster, clinging to the blood dripping from his temple.

Wilbur blanched. “Toms—“

Tommy hugged himself, arm bent at a funny angle, hunched over. Ribs caved in, smoldering clothes. His eyes remained untouched, peering up at him mournfully.

“Why didn’t you save me?” Tommy whispered.

Recoil, like he’d been struck. “Tommy, I—“

“You promised, Wilbur.” Tommy pleaded, swaying on the ledge. “You said you’d keep me safe.”

“Tommy, please—“

“He killed me, and you let him.” The kid’s smile was anything but content now, all warped and bitter and bloody.

“You *let* him,” Tommy spat, face contorted. “You let him do this to me. You failed me, Wilbur.”

Wilbur lifted a trembling hand, reaching out. Trying to hold a ghost. “I tried to get to you,” he gasped, unable to get enough air. It was all just dust and smoke. “I tried to. I did. And I– I’m trying to bring Aegis in. I promise, Toms, I won’t let him get away with what he did to you. I promise.”

“Yeah, well,” Tommy stood, clothes guttering with flame in the near-darkness, limbs all out of place. Broken. Ruined.

Dead.

The teen reached out with mangled fingers and lifted Wilbur’s chin, head tipped to the side. Wilbur couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t *breathe*–

“We all know how well you keep promises, don’t we?”

The hand slipped off his face, leaving the skin cold and smeared with blood. Tommy pulled away as Wilbur struggled for air, the kid wavering on his feet, much too close to the edge.

“Get– get away from the edge,” Wilbur squeezed out. “You’ll fall, Toms, please back up–“

“It’s not like it matters,” Tommy said, grinning. “I’m already dead.”

With that, Tommy tipped, falling over the edge. Wilbur lunged for him with a strangled scream, arm outstretched, fingers closing on open air.

He startled awake with a gasp, tangled in sweaty blankets. Chest heaving, Wilbur blinked at the darkness, pins pricking his outstretched arm. There were tears on his cheeks.

He lay there, still lost in the haze of the dream, feeling Tommy’s phantom touch on his face. His chest ached. Faces loomed out of the darkness– Tommy’s, scrunched up in a laugh. Phil’s, disappointed and worried. Aegis’ eyes, wide and bruised.

Jerkily, he sat up, flicking on the bedside lamp. Wilbur let his eyes adjust, counting his breaths. In for four, out for four. In for four, out for four.

It didn’t work.

The dream still clung to his skin like syrup, sticky and cloying. He couldn’t shake it off, couldn’t get Tommy’s mocking laugh out of his head. A distraction. He needed a distraction.

Wilbur’s eyes fell on the handmade book resting on his nightstand. His breath caught. Tommy’s messy chicken scratch stared up at him, mocking. *How to Poetry for Pretentious Pricks*. It was practically illegible.

Carefully he picked it up, flipping through the flimsy pages of printer paper, past long and short poems, ones with stupid little doodles on them or things underlined, remnants of Tommy that made his heart hurt. Inevitably, he wound up on the page with the Minecraft End poem on it. It took up like three pages, even in the tiny font.

Tommy had scribbled pictures all around the edges, a malformed creeper that was even more nightmarish than the actual thing. Little diamond blocks, a pickaxe or two, and even stick figures of two sword-wielding players in helmets and chest plates, the label “Big Men” scrawled above their heads.

Fresh tears tracked down his cheeks. Techno had always teased him for being a crier.

And the universe said I love you

“Yeah, well,” Wilbur sneered, words loud in the quiet room. A sob tore at the back of his throat.

And the universe said you are not alone

Paper crumpled between his fingers.

“The universe fucking *lied*.”

You are the player.

Wake up.

Tommy awoke to the sound of typing.

He groaned, limbs stiff, shifting on the couch. There was practically a mound of blankets on him, no doubt the product of someone’s late-night fretting. It was nice, being taken care of. Even if he was now boiling to death.

With a grunt, Tommy threw off the blankets with his free arm, rolling himself off the couch in an attempt to stand up. Unfortunately, his legs didn’t get the memo, and he ended up on the floor with a rather painful thud.

The typing stopped.

“You good, man?”

“Never better,” Tommy wheezed.

“You sure? That sounded painful as hell.”

“You’d be correct.”

He craned his neck to look at Tubbo, who was sitting at the kitchen table with a laptop, looking concerned. “I’m fine,” he reassured, even though his shoulder was pulsing.

Tubbo frowned, but didn’t push it. “You want something to eat? It’s past noon. You’ve been out for quite a while.”

“Sure.” Tommy slowly got off the floor, feeling considerably better than he had last night, shoulder and somewhat fractured bones aside. He made his way over to the kitchen, plopping down the chair next to Tubbo. “Where’s Boo at?”

“Work,” Tubbo replied, getting up to get him something out of the kitchen. “It’s easier to pay rent with two of us, but we still need jobs. Fighting crime by breaking the law isn’t very profitable.”

Tommy snorted. “Tell me about it.”

“You want toast? We’ve got jelly and everything.”

“Toast sounds perfect, thanks.” Tommy reached out and pulled the laptop closer, curious. There was some sort of program running that was filtering through news articles and social media sites, flagging certain pieces of text before closing out of them again. Tommy watched it run, fascinated. He’d never really understood coding and all that, but he’d always thought it was cool as fuck.

A plate was set down next to him, along with a cup of orange juice. “Here,” Tubbo said, pushing it toward him. “I’ll make you something else if you’re still hungry after.”

Gratefully, Tommy snatched up the toast and took a bite as Tubbo returned to his seat.

“What is that?” he asked, nodding at the computer. “It looks complicated.”

“Oh! It’s a program I made to track any big events, like we talked about last night. If any potential gatherings or protests that might be used by Dream are mentioned online, this will send me an alert. Then we can start planning.”

This was where their conversation had gone before Tommy passed out on the couch. If Tommy’s trace was out there, there was a good chance Dream was going to find a way to use it. Their current theory was relatively simple: Dream would use Tommy’s trace to duplicate his powers, and much like the CopyCat attack, would send out a decoy Aegis to cause some sort of disturbance in a public area, probably one with a high press presence. Heroes would be sent to the wanted super, Ignition would go batshit, and Dream would be able to sit back as the world went to hell right in front of the media’s cameras.

They had a guess as to what the how was going to be. Now they just needed the when.

“Huh.” Tommy peered at the screen. “Cool.”

Tubbo grinned. “Damn right.”

He took another bite of toast. “You get anything yet?”

Tubbo shook his head, tapping in a few commands that pulled up a separate page, containing a list of results. “Nothing promising. Mostly private events, a few things involving heroes, but nothing that would create a big enough impact for Dream to take the risk.”

Tommy hummed, finishing his breakfast.

Now, they played the waiting game.

A few hours later, Tubbo's computer beeped with an alert.

It had been left alone for a while, running in the background. Tommy had fallen asleep on the couch again after playing video games on Ranboo's beat up 3DS, still worn out.

Tubbo had gone out shopping, needing to restock on food and medical supplies, now that Tommy would be staying with them for the unforeseeable future. Ranboo was still at work.

They'd find the alert in an hour or two, by then accompanied by two or three more flagged sources, all reporting the same thing.

"Memorial to Honor Victims of the Recent Villain Attacks this Friday– Hero Guild to Give Speech and Make Promises to the People"

"Victims of Dream CopyCat Attacks to Be Honored This Week"

"Heroes to Make a Public Address at this Friday's Memorial Service"

A villain's perfect opportunity.

It was poetic, really.

Chapter End Notes

RIP Wilbur. That's what he gets for constantly making me upset with his lore. Fuck that guy. Instead, Benchtrio. *nods wisely*

Benchtrio. Yes. Incredible.

(I am an avid cc!Wilbur fan no one come after me, I beg)

Also I literally wrote half of this at work lmao. Out here getting paid \$15 an hour to sit at a desk and write fan fic on company time. What even is reality at this point. (I have a 3 page paper due tomorrow, have not started it. Guys, I am a walking disaster with all the wrong priorities. This is tragic.)

Hope everyone is doing okay! I love you guys <3

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

taps mic This thing on?

Lovely people! I hath returned from my long slumber. You may rejoice!

cue joyous clapping and screaming, perhaps someone fainting for dramatic effect

Yeah, basically took an unplanned 3 month hiatus because end of senior year burnout is a deadly killer and honestly should be addressed as a public health crisis. Dear god. But hey! No more high school for me! Summer break and college and all that, here we come.

Anyway, here's the chapter I'm sure you've all been anxiously waiting for/j. It's like the longest continuous chapter I've ever written, hopefully that makes up for how long it took to write.

Enjoy.

TW: Blood/injury, obnoxious abuse of italics

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was a balmy day for the end of December, watery sunlight gracing the city for the first time in a week. It was cold, sure, with dirtied snow still coating the ground, all muddied by footprints and tires. But no cars rumbled by, no shouts or horns or the bustle of people, even at noon on a Friday. For a city block, it was almost...peaceful.

“I don’t want to be here.”

“I know, Wil.”

“It’s bullshit.”

“I know, Wil.”

“Absolute bullshit. It’s fucking ridiculous.”

Beside him, Techno let out a long-suffering sigh. “Look, I get that this is difficult for you—“

Wilbur scowled, crossing his arms tight across his chest, fingers digging into the sleeves of his Ignition costume. *Difficult* was an understatement. Try *infuriating*, or perhaps *absolutely fucking awful*, or maybe even *makes him want to curl up into a ball and have a massive breakdown right here in the middle of the street* instead.

“But we’re required to be here. You know that. And even then, one of the victims they’re honorin’ was your friend–“ Wilbur flinched. “And as much as you’re acting like you don’t want to be here, I’m fairly certain you would feel even worse missin’ it.” Techno side-eyed him. “Am I correct?”

Wilbur didn’t respond, jaw twitching as he ground his teeth together, glaring out into the cleared street where the memorial service was to be held.

Techno sighed again. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“It just feels… cheap, somehow,” Wilbur muttered, the grip on his sleeves abusing the poor material. “They don’t actually care, most of them. This shit happens every other week, I know most of the people here are completely sick of it by now. And the Guild doesn’t give a fuck either– this is just a PR stunt and you know it.”

Techno nodded, eyes tracking the workers who were setting up a cluster of flower wreaths in front of the raised platform they were waiting beside. “Trust me, I know.”

“Then why–“ Wilbur snapped, frustrated.

“Because it’s our job to show the people under our protection that we still care, still think they matter.” Techno tipped his head to the side, fixing him with a meaningful look. “I thought that you, out of all of us, would want to do that.”

Wilbur sucked air through his teeth. “I did. I–I still do, it’s just–“

Blond hair, bright smile and a brighter laugh.

“You can’t protect me all the time, Wil.”

“I know, but I can still try.”

The vigilante in question is currently being charged as responsible for the death of–

He glared at the platform beneath his feet, wanting to sink right through it. “My priorities changed, that’s all.”

Techno’s eyes were still on him. He could feel them burning into the side of his skull, searching for something that wasn’t there, that had gone up in smoke days ago. Wilbur didn’t have the heart to try to explain to him just how hard it was to use ash as fuel, how difficult it was to keep lit a flame that had been guttering for months–years even. Tommy was his last match, his last chance at reignition, and that hope had splintered between his fingers. Now, he was left with nothing but an empty box and even emptier hands.

“Promise me one thing,” Techno said, breaking the sullen silence between them. Wilbur hiked his shoulders up to his ears, watching people trickle into the street, faces solemn, hands clasped around bouquets of flowers far too beautiful for their ugly purpose.

Can’t you see? something inside him wailed, Can’t you see how sick of promises I am?

“Promise you won’t lose yourself to this whole ‘revenge’ plot of yours. Put yourself first, for once.”

Wilbur closed his eyes, letting out a sharp breath. “Techno—“

“I’m not tellin’ you to quit. I’m not stupid enough to think you’d listen. Just—“ Techno let out a frustrated sound. “I didn’t know the kid all that well, but he—he wouldn’t want this for you, Wilbur. You have to know that.”

“Shut up,” Wilbur gritted out, holding back the wailing in his head from coming out of his mouth. “You don’t know *shit*, Techno.”

“Really?” Techno asked, skeptical. “Because you haven’t slept properly in days. You drink more coffee than you ever have in your life, you hardly eat, and you’re *angry*.”

Eyes snapping open, Wilbur whirled on his brother. “Of course I’m fucking angry, Techno! That fucker killed *Tommy*—“

Techno stared back at him. Wilbur swallowed, thrown off by the horribly sad look in his eyes. It seemed too out of place on his brother’s face. “I wasn’t talking about Aegis, Wilbur. I was talking about *you*.”

The hostility in his stance froze, all his righteous fury faltering. “W-what?”

“Wilbur,” Techno said, “You’re mad at yourself. I know you, I can see it. You’re telling yourself you failed, that this is somehow your fault—“ He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, where pictures of those killed in the attacks sat, flowers layering up around them like snow. Where Wilbur knew that bland work ID photo of Tommy currently sat, frozen in time and laid among the lost. “And you’re taking it out on yourself. You can pretend the only person you hate right now is Aegis all you want, but there’s only so many people you can fool.”

Techno smiled, but the look didn’t reach his eyes. “I’m not one of them, Wil.”

Wilbur swallowed, hard.

“There’s nothing you could’ve done.”

“I should’ve *known*, Tech,” he whispered, watching a group of faceless city officials arrive, no doubt some Guild members in the mix, the cluster making their way toward the platform at the head of the gathering. “I was friends with that vigilante for *months*. I should’ve seen the signs, *something*.” He frowned, regret and doubt curling in his stomach. “I should’ve seen something.”

Techno shrugged, reaching over and giving his shoulder a squeeze. The officials had reached the stage, climbing up the steps opposite to them. “Sometimes,” Techno said, smoothing out his features as a camera flashed, the press hidden in the fringe of the crowd finally making themselves known, “the best thing we can do is forgive ourselves.”

Wilbur blinked rapidly, swallowing again and opening his mouth to protest.

“Sometimes,” Techno repeated, catching his eye, the look soft despite the stoic persona his brother was about to put on, “It’s the only thing we *can* do.”

A microphone squealed and Wilbur winced, the shrill sound ringing in his ears. Techno gave his shoulder one final squeeze, stepping past him and up the stairs, shoulders back. Revenant to the end, unbeatable, untamable, and unfeeling, just the way everyone thought the hero was.

Oh, how wrong they all were.

The microphone crackled again, a bland voice muttering, “Testing, testing, one-two-three.” into it.

Wilbur took a deep breath, steeling himself. He was a Hero. He was the *people’s* Hero, Ignition, the only one who gave a shit about anyone out there. He could do this.

For Tommy, he thought bitterly, schooling his features into something acceptable for the media, *Do it for him*. A brief flash of determination flickered through him. *Someone needs to honor his memory, and it better be the person who actually knew him, someone who actually cared.*

With a deep breath, Wilbur turned and started up the stairs to the sound of, “Welcome, fine people. We are solemnly gathered here today to honor those lost in the recent attacks, those who live on forever in our hearts—“

Taking his place on the stage beside Techno, Wilbur set his gaze on the horizon, fixed unblinkingly at the rooftops.

Let’s get this shitshow on the road.

“I feel like I should be coming with you guys. I– it doesn’t feel right.”

“The only thing you should be doing is getting some more rest,” Tubbo shot back, pointing an accusing finger in Tommy’s direction. “Your shoulder is a problem and your ribs are still busted, dude. No way.”

Tommy groaned, slouching dramatically against the edge of the countertop. He’d been loitering in the kitchen for the better part of twenty minutes, watching as the other two boys got their gear in order and prepared to leave. “But *Tubbo*,” he whined, “I’m not useless! I can– I can be backup! I’ll hide on the rooftops, you won’t even know I’m there until you need me!”

Ranboo shook his head, snapping his goggles over his eyes, the mismatched lenses covering the stern look on his face. “We’re not doubting your abilities, Tommy. We’re just stopping you from being stupid.”

“Yeah,” Tubbo grinned, “You need a lot of help with that.”

“Hey!”

Tubbo broke into a cackle as Ranboo smacked him half-heartedly over the back of the head, Tommy still spluttering in protest.

“Look, Big Man,” Tubbo got out, still laughing. “We’ll be fine. The heroes will be present at the event too, so it’s not like we’ll be fighting Dream alone if the bastard decides to show his face.”

Tommy grimaced. “You don’t know what he’s capable of. None of us do.”

Tubbo shrugged. “Then there’s not much we can really do, is there?”

“You could let me come with you—“

Ranboo sighed, scooting around Tubbo as Tommy continued to argue, words petering out when he was pulled into an unsuspecting hug. “We just want you to be safe,” Ranboo said, doing his best not to squish Tommy’s injured arm, “You’ve already been hurt enough by this mess, and I’m not risking making it worse. There’s only so much one person can take. You’ve done enough.”

He gave Tommy another squeeze before pulling away, setting a hand on his uninjured shoulder. “Just let us take care of it for you, alright? That’s what friends are for.”

Tommy searched Ranboo’s face, trying to peer past the Enderwalk getup, protests bubbling at the back of his throat.

He trusted them, he did. And as loathe as he was to admit it, they were right. He wasn’t exactly in peak physical condition at the moment. With his messed up shoulder and ribs, he’d be automatically put at a disadvantage in a fight. Tommy wasn’t stupid— he could assess risk and calculate outcomes as well as any other person on the field. But he didn’t like being left behind, either.

Staying out of fights had never really been his strong suit. He was seventeen and a vigilante, for god’s sake. If he’d been good at backing down, he wouldn’t be here in the first place.

With a sigh, Tommy nodded. “You better not get yourselves killed,” he said, squinting up at Ranboo. “Or I’ll bring you back and kick your asses myself, fucked up shoulder or no.”

Ranboo snorted, smile visible even with his face covered. “I’ll try my best.”

Tommy jabbed a demanding finger in Tubbo’s direction. “That applies to you too, Bee Boy.”

He was given a sloppy salute in return. “Aye aye, Captain.”

An alarm went off, chirping from the comms set in Tubbo and Ranboo’s utility belts.

“Time to go,” Tubbo announced, slinging on his goggles and heading toward the door. “We’ll be back before you know it. Hopefully.”

“Very reassuring,” Tommy grumbled, watching as they both slipped out the door, Ranboo shooting him one last look before the door closed and they were gone.

And Tommy was left alone to wait out the storm. Great.

Sighing, he shuffled out of the kitchen, scooping up the remote to the boys’ clunky TV and flopping onto the couch with a wince. Not his best choice, but hey. He was *moping* here. Give him a break.

Tommy turned on the tv with a click, surfing through the channels and static until he landed on a news station, live broadcasting just the event he was looking for. He settled back into the couch cushions, watching with narrowed eyes. The camera panned over the heads of the mourners and citizens gathered at the memorial service before settling on the stage at the head of the crowd. He frowned, twinge in his chest as Ignition came into view, face solemn and eyes unfocused, standing stiff as a board next to Revenant.

Tubbo and Ranboo could insist he stay behind, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to wait in the dark until they got back. They could sideline him all they wanted, but there was only so much of that he could put up with.

The city official hosting the ceremony droned on, voice tinny through the tv speakers, but Tommy’s attention was only on Wilbur and the surrounding crowd, waiting for something to happen. Either for Dream to make an appearance, or for Wilbur to fall apart.

In all honesty, Tommy wasn’t really sure which one he expected more.

“...We must remain strong, have faith in our Heroes! I understand that in the wake of tragedy such as this, times can seem tough. The future may feel bleak. But my dear people, we cannot let ourselves lose hope, lose faith in those who have dedicated their lives to protecting us. We must trust the system. We must—“

Shut the fuck up before I strangle someone, Wilbur thought bitterly, tense in every sense of the word. The man had been babbling on for the better part of half an hour now, spouting nothing but basic, propagandic *bullshit*. He’d been expecting it, of course, but staring at the mound of flowers and flickering candles now laid in the middle of the street, anger flared in his chest, hot and sharp.

Beside him, Techno never wavered, looking on at the proceedings with faux interest. Ever so slightly, his brother leaned over, bumping their shoulders together, movement near invisible to the cameras.

Calm, he could practically hear Techno say, *Just a few more minutes of this. Keep it together.*

Taking a deep breath, Wilbur tore his gaze away from where he had been burning furious holes into the side of the speaker's head, looking out into the crowd. He shifted, the back of his neck prickling uncomfortably.

Someone in the crowd moved.

It wasn't a dramatic movement, a few steps, really. Just shuffling closer to the makeshift shrine in the center of the street, perhaps a late arrival who still wanted to pay their respects. The movement sent a ripple through the crowd, people shifting, low murmurs breaking the previous attentive silence.

"Remain vigilant!" the speaker demanded, pounding a palm against the podium he stood behind, emboldened by his own words. "Remain connected to your communities, your families. With the support of our heroes, the strength of this city's fine citizens, there is nothing—"

A startled noise burst out of the crowd, the speech faltering for a second at the interruption. In tandem, Wilbur and Techno stiffened as a voice screeched, "Hey! What're you doing?!"

Techno took a step forward while Wilbur remained frozen, hands fisted at his sides.

"Everything alright?" Techno called, the flat voice of Revenant washing over a crowd that was becoming more restless by the second, people backing away from the beflowered memorial.

Wilbur squinted, watching like a hawk, waiting for the faintest movement from the source of the disturbance.

His eyes caught on a flicker of light, the smallest, jerkiest of motions and went wide, watching as the lit match went tumbling into the pile of flowers and the lovingly placed pictures and notes. In seconds, the collection had caught. Before anyone had time to react, to attempt to apprehend the perpetrator, they had dumped some kind of liquid onto the small flame and begun to retreat through the crowd, jostling people as they went.

In seconds, the memorial was ablaze.

The crowd was in a panic, scrambling to get away from the leaping flames as the official sputtered out orders into the microphone, demanding everyone stay calm as the speakers squealed. Techno caught Wilbur's eyes, nodding, before they both jumped off the stage and into the crowd, Wilbur running toward the flames, Techno through the chaos and after the arsonist.

Wilbur, taking advantage of the relatively fire-resistant qualities of his suit, ushered bystanders away, back to the heat of the flames, keeping anyone from getting too close. He risked a glance over his shoulder, taking in the curling edges of the pictures, the flames licking their way up the wreath stands, the display crumbling into ash. Tommy's photo was long gone.

The anger that had been building inside his chest listening to that mockery of a speech coiled tighter, digging itself into his lungs with sharp thorns. He watched as one of the wreath stands collapsed, sending another bout of flame guttering into the air.

Scorched concrete, jagged rebar jutting into the sky—

The coil inside Wilbur's chest snapped, an inferno rushing through his veins. Heat pulsed under his skin, mimicking the burning mess in front of him. His hands flexed, tendons wound dangerously tight, the familiar buzz of his powers thrumming in his fingertips.

For the briefest of seconds, Ignition spotted a flicker of red out of the corner of his eye.

"Shit," Tubbo cursed, watching the crowd scatter, peeking out of the alleyway he'd hidden in. "Enderwalk, we've got a situation."

"On my way," Ranboo replied through the comms, the tell-tale *vwhoop* of his powers sounding shortly after. Tubbo watched as he blinked into existence on a rooftop across the street, letting out a low whistle at the sight of the fire and the heroes plunging into the crowd.

"Any sign of Dream yet?"

"No," Tubbo said, leaping onto a dumpster and preparing to climb a fire escape to get a better view of the chaos, now that people were fleeing down the sidewalk and surrounding streets, obstructing his view. "Although I'd bet everything I've got that he had something to do with the nice bonfire they've got going."

Ranboo hummed.

With a grunt, Tubbo hauled himself up onto the escape, dashing up the stairs to the furthest corner of the building, staring out into the crowd. "While you were checking the perimeter, some guy torched the flowers and took off with Revenant on his tail. You see 'em anywhere?"

"No," Ranboo said, moving around on the rooftop, *"They got lost in the crowd. I can still see Ignition though, he's—"* Ranboo stopped.

"He's what?" Tubbo asked, moving up to his own rooftop. Alleys were overrated anyway. "Ender, you cut out."

"...Bee, he's got his powers activated."

Tubbo's heart lurched in his chest. "What do you mean he's got his powers activated?" he yelped, sprinting over to the edge of the rooftop, "He has to know better than that, with all of these people still around—"

“Look,” Ranboo said, gesturing across the street to a point in the middle of the crowd where Ignition was stalking away from the burning memorial, hands glowing a bright gold.

Tubbo sucked in a breath. *“If he accidentally touches something—“*

“There’s going to be a lot of casualties,” Ranboo finished grimly. *“I know.”*

“Fuck, okay—“ Tubbo wracked his brain for a plan of action, realizing too late that they had been banking on Ignition keeping his cool long enough for them to find Dream or whoever the villian had working for him. *“Ender, you teleport down there and try to talk him down, or at least try to keep anyone from getting too close to him while he’s like this.”*

“On it. What about you?”

“I’m going to try to direct civilian traffic out of the way, but you call me if you need any backup with—“ Tubbo stopped, peering into an alleyway adjacent to the building Ranboo was standing on. *Was he hallucinating, or was that—* *“Scratch that,”* Tubbo said, flipping open a panel on the chest of his suit and pressing a button, listening to the clunking and whirring that followed. He summoned forth his powers, glowing orange spikes hovering over the open palms of his hands, just waiting to be thrown with pin-point accuracy. *“I think I just found Dream.”*

“Wait, what—“

“Go collect Ignition,” Tubbo ordered, stepping onto the edge of the roof, flexing his shoulders and listening to the mechanical buzz of his tech that came in response. *“I’ll check this out.”*

“Tubbo you can’t be serious—“

“I’ll be fine.”

”You’ll be fighting alone, that’s not what we agreed on!”

“Change of plans, Boo!” He shouted, stepping off into the air and plunging toward the street, waiting for the wings to kick in. *“The priority is Ignition! Remember that!”*

Wilbur chased after Aegis, hot on the fleeing vigilante’s heels as the man shoved civilians out of the way, scrambling to get free of the panicking mob. A woman went tumbling to the ground, and Wilbur saw red, pouring on the speed.

He hadn’t seen Aegis since he’d magically vanished through the smoke earlier that week, pleading that he was *sorry*. As if sorry fixed anything. As if sorry brought Tommy back.

And now, here the vigilante was with the audacity to help an arsonist ruin the memorial service. It was honestly appalling. Wilbur was entirely disgusted with himself for having even tried to defend the man in the first place.

“Aegis!” he shouted, shouldering his way through the crowd, holding onto barely enough mental clarity to avoid brushing anything with his hands. His head whipped around frantically, searching the crowd with hungry eyes. “Face me, you fucking *murderer!*”

He caught a glimpse of red disappearing around a corner, the flash of a jacket, a white hood.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Wilbur growled, pushing through the gathered mourners even faster, ignoring the startled cries of those around him, the flashing of cameras and the babbled shouting of news reporters. He broke through the crowd, sprinting down the clear street and around the corner of the building just in time to see Aegis vanish into an alleyway.

He slowed down, walking briskly to the entrance, hands held out at his sides, fingers splayed. They radiated energy, the heat so fierce even he could feel it. He stopped at the mouth of the alley, coming to a halt when he found Aegis standing still in the middle of it, facing away from him.

“What?” Wilbur sneered, staring at Aegis’ turned back. His lips curled, hatred heavy in his gut. *To think I ever trusted you.* “Too much of a fucking coward to even face me? To face the things you did?”

Aegis didn’t say anything, just activated his discs, fists clenched at his sides.

To think I ever called you a friend.

Wilbur laughed, the sound unhinged—*wild*. He stalked forward, scooping up a wayward glass bottle with ease, feeling the smooth surface begin to warp and bend beneath his touch.

Pathetic.

“Burn in hell,” he snarled, hefting the bottle.

At that, Aegis whipped around, spinning just in time to sloppily heft his right shield. The bottle made an impact right along the center of it. It bloomed in a beautiful ball of fire, spraying molten glass and shards in every direction, forcing the vigilante to stagger back.

Grinning wickedly, Wilbur paced forward, scooping another trash projectile off of the ground.

He pictured Tommy’s face. Plaster rain. Jagged rebar.

His arm lifted again, golden light pouring from his fingertips. Phantom flames danced in front of his eyes, a prophecy of what was to come. His arm reared back, prepared for another throw.

Someone grabbed his wrist.

Wilbur went rigid, feral smile frozen in place with surprise. *Who the fuck*— He tore his gaze away from Aegis, honestly a little shocked to find another vigilante at his side.

“Put it down,” Enderwalk ordered, surrounded by a cloud of flickering violet particles. Wilbur didn’t move. “*Ignition*. Put. It. Down.”

“Let go of me,” Wilbur said, voice flat. Emotionless. The vigilante’s grip faltered, no doubt finally catching onto the unhinged look in the hero’s eyes. “Or I swear to god, you’re going to get a faceful of gunpowder.”

Enderwalk flinched at that, but didn’t let go. If anything, his hold grew stronger, more determined. “I can’t do that.”

“You want to fucking test me?” Wilbur hissed, crushing the pop can in his grip, “Try me. See how it turns out.”

“I can’t let you attack him,” Enderwalk insisted, sounding regretful. Honest to god, *regretful*. Still, his grip didn’t waver. “I’m sorry.”

”I’m sorry.”

”Sorry doesn’t cut it.”

Wilbur pushed air through his nose, tipping his head back with the harsh breath. The sun was blinding. “People sure do say that a lot,” he laughed, shaking his head. He side-eyed Enderwalk, whose expression remained hidden beneath his mask and goggles, but the twitching fingers on his wrist told it all. “Too bad it doesn’t mean *shit*.”

Wilbur closed his eyes, turned his face away from the can, and squeezed.

Tubbo’s shoes grazed the asphalt, wings whirring behind him. He landed, stingers out and ready. He could’ve sworn he’d seen a flash of Dream’s distinctive green up on the rooftop, but now he wasn’t so sure. At first glance, the alleyway seemed empty, as if the villain had already fled. That was, if he’d ever been there at all. Tubbo scanned the space one more time, half contemplating just giving up on his suspicion and going to find Ranboo instead. Then his eyes caught upon someone lurking in the thin slice of shadow cast by the noonday sun. They were looking right at him.

Tubbo immediately raised his stingers, preparing to throw if necessary, but they didn’t move. Not a muscle. They just stood there, leaning casually against the building wall, still as a statue. Staring. He could feel their gaze burning holes through his skull, boring right through him. A wave of goosebumps prickled over his skin.

“Hey! Emo guy!” Tubbo called, taking a step forward. He twirled a stinger between his fingers, attempting to match the casual air of the possible villain. They didn’t react. “You don’t happen to know anything about this lovely bonfire we’ve got going on, do you?” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the torched memorial, the general chaos still visible through the mouth of the alleyway.

The silhouette turned their head, burning gaze slipping over Tubbo’s shoulder to land on the guttering flames in the street behind him. Tubbo got nothing but silence in return, the only sound the increasingly frantic buzzing of his wings as his shoulders wound tighter and tighter and the faint static whine of a silent comm in his ear. Ranboo must have muted himself earlier.

“I mean,” Tubbo continued, watching the figure for any sign of movement, any hint or glow of powers. *Anything*. “It’s a bit sus of you to just be chilling in a random alley in the middle of the day. Just sayin’.”

Still, they said nothing.

Tubbo took another tentative step forward. For a second, a wave of concern washed over him, worried that perhaps this wasn’t Dream after all, just some rando who’d stepped outside to take a smoke break or something and wound up in the wrong place at a bad time. “...You sure you’re alright, dude? You’re awfully quiet. And still. And emo.” He laughed awkwardly, fingers twitching. Something moved, and his eyes snapped toward the movement, unable to tell what exactly was going on. He realized too little too late that tinted goggles designed mostly for nighttime patrols are not ideal for the middle of the afternoon. “...Can’t forget the emo part, right?” he finished weakly.

The person shifted, straightening to their full height, hands drifting out of their pockets. Tubbo swallowed hard, alarm bells ringing in his head.

Boo, he thought to himself, *I think I’ve made a mistake*.

“Oh, I’m perfectly alright,” the person replied smoothly, stepping out of the shadows. “I honestly have to say, I’ve never been better.” The sun hit their face, lighting up the cheshire smile upon it, illuminating brilliantly bright eyes, a mix of purple and green. Dead eyes, like a shark. *Predatory*. “Your concern is touching though,” Dream said, pressing a hand over his heart. “Maybe, I’ll even feel a teensy bit guilty when I kill you.” The smile widened, showing far too many teeth. “...But I doubt it.”

Instantly, green tendrils shot out from seemingly every direction, swarming. Tubbo launched himself into the sky with a startled shout, barely avoiding the strike. He wove between the first onslaught of strings, dodging, zipping up and down. Dream simply stood still, head tipped up to look at him with glowing eyes, hands clasped politely behind his back. His powers moved of their own accord, snaking between lines of brick, curling through the air like vines, weaving an incomprehensible net around Tubbo.

He jerked to the side, narrowly tucking a foot out of the way in time to avoid snagging a string around his ankle. Wildly, Tubbo banked, scanning through the mess of whipping tendrils, eyes sharp and waiting for an opportunity to get in a shot at Dream, or even a chance

to retreat. Another string wrapped itself around his knee, yanking. Tubbo swore, throwing a stinger at the base of it, snapping clear through the thing. It fizzled and died, falling limp to the ground. Instinctively, Tubbo jerked his head to the side just in time to avoid another whizzing past his right ear.

“You’re not very fun to toy with,” Dream remarked, peering up at him with a nearly bored expression on his face. Power radiated from him, the eye in a hurricane of neon green. The villain tipped his head to the side, considering. “You know, at least that Aegis guy was interesting. He actually bothered to give me a reaction.” Tubbo’s jaw twitched, clenched tight as he dove forward, rolling midair to launch another stinger at two strings rocketing through the air behind him.

Tommy stared at him from the couch, tears in his eyes. He smiled weakly.

“It, uh– kinda sucks, a-actually.”

Anger burned bright in his chest.

“Too bad he’s been sidelined,” the villain continued with a sigh. “If Ignition weren’t so finicky, I could’ve had so much more fun with him.” Dream shook his head, ignoring the bright orange stinger that flew past his arm, Tubbo’s shot gone wide. “A waste.”

“You’re a psychopath, you know that?” Tubbo shouted over the whistling air, “You’re fucking insane!”

He slashed another puppet string with his left hand, fumbling his comm with the other. He jammed his thumb into the talk button, opening the channel. “Ranboo,” he panted, “I need an exit–”

Out of nowhere, something slammed into his wings, wrenching him to the side. Tubbo gasped, clipping the wall of the alley. There was a faint crunch, and the constant buzz of the mechanics faltered, lagging in the air. Thrashing, Tubbo tried to cut through the string tangled in his wing, but another one wrapped around his wrist, dragging him down, down toward Dream.

“Bee I’m a bit–” There was the faint sound of an explosion and a muffled yell. “Busy!”

“I was right!” Tubbo shouted through gritted teeth, wrenching his free arm back and squinting through the flailing tendrils. “It was, in fact, Dream!”

With a yell, he threw his stinger, the orange energy piercing through the air like a bullet, felling multiple strings as it went. Another tendril snaked around his chest, drawing tight around his ribcage. Something popped and he gasped, sharp pain lancing through him.

“...Tubbo?”

Tubbo watched through blurred eyes as Dream turned, staring the flying stinger in the face. It would land, it had to land, there was no way Dream could–

“Tubbo?!”

Before his very eyes, Dream dissolved in a shower of purple particles, reappearing a few feet away, expression less than pleased.

“...Oh fuck,” Tubbo whispered, just as he was slammed into the ground at the villain’s feet.

”Screw this, I’ll be there in a second. Just hold on–” There was a faint *vwhoop* over the comms.

Dream loomed over him, grinning. “Teleportation. It’s rather handy, isn’t it?”

Vwhoop. “Just one more jump, Bo, don’t you dare die on me–”

The tendril around his chest loosened, pulling back, allowing Tubbo to desperately gulp in air. He scrabbled at the pavement, trying to push off the ground, but was held down by the power ensnaring his limbs.

“Bye bye, little Bee.”

The string reared up and plunged through his side, shooting clear out the back. Tubbo screamed.

”TUBBO–”

Vwhoop.

The world bent.

Techno caught up to the arsonist relatively quickly. To be fair, they weren’t exactly subtle with their fleeing, what with their panicked scramble to reach open pavement and all. Why the criminal didn’t bother trying to lose him in the crowd or side streets, he didn’t know.

If you’re going to commit a crime in front of multiple heroes and half a dozen news stations, Techno thought, slightly amused despite himself, *At least be good at it.*

He chased them out of the crowd, hopping over the barrier blocking off the road for the ceremony, skidding past parked cars. The arsonist jumped off the sidewalk, sliding over the hood of a car and running into the middle of the street. Completely exposed. Completely undefended. No visible weapons.

Techno had to hold back a laugh, only steps behind. *Rookie mistake.*

That was the thought, of course, until he leapt forward in a confident attempt to tackle them and was blindsided by the unfurling of a pair of shadowy wings. Techno staggered back, cursing as his nose quickly righted itself, the trickle of blood stopping nearly as soon as it had

started. Through watery eyes, he *gaped*, watching as the arsonist stumbled forward, flapping the wings desperately, trying to get the hang of them.

Not much caught him by surprise. Revenant was stoic, steady, an unmovable, unshakable force. But this?

He didn't—

What the hell?

There was only one person who truly knew the ins and outs of those powers, and Techno could confidently say that the fumbling criminal in front of him was *not* Phil.

He had a very, very nasty feeling about this.

And the worst part was, when Techno had a bad feeling, that usually meant he was right, especially when he didn't want to be.

Shaking himself out of it, Techno came back to his senses just in time to register the arsonist finally taking flight, beginning to hover over the ground with uneasy wingbeats. They wobbled in the air, clearly unused to using the powers they had stolen.

Without hesitation, Techno lunged forward again, bracing against the asphalt and grabbing onto their dangling ankle with both hands. The Rook-wannabe shouted, kicking at him, but he just leaned back, tugging them back toward the ground, eyes squinted against the buffeting wind and shadowed feathers smacking into his mask.

“You know it'd be a lot easier for the both of us if you cut that out!” Techno called over their angry shouts, ducking below yet another desperate kick, “You don't know how to use those and we both know it.”

“Fuck off, shithead!” they screamed, trying to twist out of his grip.

In response, Techno grit his teeth and *yanked*.

With a frightened squawk, the criminal shot toward the ground, tackled by Techno in an instant. There was a brief scuffle that involved plenty of kicking and punching and flailing wings, but ended up with Techno victorious, kneeling on their back with the criminal's arms pinned, stuck fast.

“Now,” he panted, glaring down at them, “You're going to tell me where the hell you got Rook's powers from, and you're gonna do it fast.”

“Fuck you,” they spat, cheek against the asphalt. “You're not getting *shit* from me.”

Techno leaned down, putting greater weight on their back, pressing between the flickering power of the unstable wings. “That a promise?”

The arsonist jerked underneath him, snarling. They craned their neck and attempted to spit at him, but the shot went wide. Behind them, a camera flashed.

Techno hid a wince.

Time was up.

He let up on the pressure, still slightly unnerved by the sudden appearance of Phil's powers, holding the arsonist down as the police approached to take over the scene. Once secured, Techno stepped back, waiting to make sure the situation was entirely taken care of before moving further away. One officer gave him a questioning look at the hands-off response, and he pulled out his phone in reply, holding it up.

"Gotta make a call," he said.

The officer nodded, letting him go.

Techno pulled up one of his first contacts, jamming his thumb into the *call* button. The phone hardly rang for a few seconds before it was answered.

"Techno? What's going on? The news coverage is all over the place—"

"Sam. Listen."

The questioning stopped, replaced instantly by the attentive silence of The Warden. Knowing Sam, the man had probably put on his gear at the first sign of trouble and had spent the past ten minutes pacing his living room floor, anxiously waiting for the go-ahead.

"I need you to get down here as fast as you can. Bring the others."

"Is it really that bad?" There was a clattering in the background, metallic clangs as Sam fully suited up, gathering his trident. *"I can act as backup in a matter of minutes, but I'm not sure how fast the others might be able to respond."*

"Doesn't matter, tell them anyway. Quackity, Sapnap, Fundy—even Phil, if you can."

There was a brief second of stunned silence. If Techno was requesting *Phil*, of all people—

"I—alright. I'll send an alert right now."

"...Trust me, Sam," Techno said, watching as the police hauled the arsonist to their feet, the messy copy of Phil's wings still prominent on their back, "This whole case just got a million times more complicated."

The criminal was hauled off to a squad car, cameras flashing alongside curious onlookers who had decided the threat was no longer hazardous enough to require running. Distantly, among the excited chatter of the crowd and camera shutters and the shouting of the cops to stand clear, Techno picked up on a faint popping sound, coming from streets away.

Almost like firecrackers. Almost like fireworks, like the singe and oh-so familiar smell of gunpowder.

"...Alert has been sent out, I'm on my way. ETA of about four minutes. You staying put?"

“Nah,” Techno said, already taking off in the direction of the sound. *You better not have gotten yourself hurt, or I swear—* “I’ve got a brother to find.”

Vwoop.

Ranboo’s feet slammed into the linoleum floor of their kitchen, knees nearly buckling. He gasped for air, rapidly blinking away the black spots threatening the edge of his vision. Bone-deep exhaustion from over extending his powers dragged at him, staved off by the power of adrenaline and sheer panic alone. *Can’t pass out yet*, he desperately reminded himself, fighting to remain upright, *Save Tubbo first. Tubbo, then unconsciousness. Yes. Great plan.*

Tubbo wheezed, leaning heavily into him. Ranboo carefully readjusted his grip, trying not to jostle, but still got a groan of pain in return.

“Sorry, Bo,” he murmured, apologizing for multiple things, past and present.

Sorry for leaving you, for taking so long to get to you.

Sorry for how much I’m going to have to hurt you now.

Gentle as possible, Ranboo maneuvered his partner over to the kitchen counter. Tubbo winced with each step, cursing under his breath. With Ranboo’s help, Tubbo pushed himself up onto the surface, screaming through gritted teeth as he lay down, Ranboo fretting over him.

“I’m fine, Boo,” Tubbo panted, grimacing as a fresh wave of blood trickled between his fingers. “I’ve had worse. Probably.”

“Shut up,” Ranboo hissed, yanking a dish towel out of a drawer and pressing it to Tubbo’s stomach, pushing it into his partner’s bloody hands.

Tubbo gasped. “S-shutting up.”

“Keep pressure on it,” Ranboo ordered, backing away. Spots danced in his vision, and he caught himself on the edge of the counter, sucking in a deep breath.

C’m on Ranboo, get your shit together.

Tubbo needs you.

He needs you.

“I’ll be right back,” he squeezed out, pushing away and rushing toward the bathroom to grab the first aid kit, and maybe Tommy if he was willing. He didn’t want to force Tommy to help,

but Ranboo was only one guy, and stitches were hard enough to do when you weren't operating solo on your best friend.

It wouldn't be the first time, but this time—

Rambo sucked in a shaky breath, ripping open the bathroom cabinet doors, ignoring the fresh smear of blood that he was going to have to clean up later.

This time was the worst it's ever been.

Steeling himself, Ranboo got back to his feet, rushing out of the bathroom. He took a detour, darting over to their bedroom to ask Tommy for his help. He fumbled with the doorknob, struggling to turn it with shaking hands tacky with blood. Finally, Ranboo managed to get it open, gasping, "I need help—Tubbo's hurt bad, could you—"

A wave of cold air hit him, the crisp, fresh chill of a sunny December day. Ranboo stopped, hand slipping off the door handle in shock.

The room was empty.

There was no one there.

"Oh...Oh god—" Ranboo whispered, staring in horror at the open window. "Tommy, you *didn't*—"

Blocks away, Aegis sloppily leapt between rooftops, breathing hard. He grimaced, shifting uncomfortably as the streets flew by beneath him, block after block. His ribs were giving him shit, and his right arm still wasn't quite right, but it didn't matter.

It didn't matter.

Wilbur mattered.

And Tommy was going to save him, one way or another.

Chapter End Notes

And that's that.

I'm hoping to start like actually putting out chapters again now that I actually have time to think, especially because we're getting to the end here. The chapter count is probably

subject to change, just thought I'd give you guys a little warning. I'm considerate like that.

For those of you that stayed this long, thanks for sticking around. It means a lot. Hope you've all been well :)

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Things have reached a tipping point. It's time to see which way everything falls.

Chapter Notes

Hmm it's been a month, hasn't it. Welp. It be like that sometimes.

Welcome, ladies and gents, to the chapter you've all been waiting for! Shit is about to go *down*, trust me. Massive shoutout to Fish my absolute beloved for beta reading this and the previous chapter or two. She's currently pissed at me for making her sad, if that gives you any indication as to how this chapter is going to go.

Right! Let's get on with it, shall we? I want tears and screaming in my inbox already, it's been far too long. I'm bored.

TW: Violence, conflict, blood/injury mention, egregious over use of italics

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur watched as Enderwalk's face twisted into an expression of utter panic, and the vigilante was gone in a flash of purple before he could even blink. Whatever it was that had pulled the teleporter away, he didn't care. As long as it got the distraction out of his face, it was fine.

Wilbur turned back to the alleyway, face pulled into a snarl to face Aegis again-

And was met with empty space.

"No," he breathed, staring in disbelief. The vigilante couldn't be gone, he'd only turned his attention away for a second. *A second-*

Wilbur took a staggering step forward, breathing hard. The watery sunlight seemed harsher than ever, blinding him. Desperately, he scanned the alleyway again. And again. And again.

Aegis couldn't- he couldn't be *gone*.

Wilbur needed to take him in, he needed justice. He needed- he needed this. He needed closure, needed something, just- just *something*, needed a chance to make things right with

Tommy because this was the only way he knew *how*. Unbidden, tears welled in his eyes. They went unnoticed.

Frantically, Wilbur stumbled further into the alleyway, scanning every nook, every cranny with a newfound desperation. He'd been prepared to end it all here. To put things to rest. And then Enderwalk came and tore it all away, ripped it from his shaking hands and for *what*? To protect an ally? To spite him?

The blind anger he'd felt before had cooled. It had settled like smoldering coals in his chest, slowly building up heat into a stronger, steadier flame. He felt it take over, become pointed, become a force more terrible than fury, fueled by desperation and fear and the overwhelming sensation of helplessness.

It felt like standing on a razor's edge, the world holding its breath as it waited to see which way Wilbur was going to fall.

The anger burned brighter and brighter, sunk heavier, deeper, until Wilbur felt like every breath was aflame. He stared down at his hands, horrified at the way they shook, at how *empty* they were. At how empty he felt.

There was a sound up on the rooftop to his right. The scrape of gravel skittering over the edge, tumbling into the gap below. Wilbur's head snapped up, eyes narrowing. Squinting through the glare of the sun, Wilbur peered up at the edge of the building, at the hunched figure standing there and breathing hard, leaning awkwardly to one side. His heart stopped.

Aegis froze.

They stared at one another.

The anger in Wilbur's gut smoldered.

Slowly, unsteadily, Aegis raised his hands. "Look," he called down, finally bothering to speak. Wilbur hardly noted the tremor in his voice. "I don't— I don't want to fight."

"Come down here then," Wilbur said, voice deadly calm in comparison. Too calm.

"I will," Aegis promised, "I will, just— you have to hear me out, okay?" Wilbur's jaw clenched. He said nothing. "Please," Aegis practically begged, drooping. His right arm spasmed, falling to his side with a poorly hidden wince. "*Please*, Ignition."

The flame guttered. For a moment, Aegis sounded desperate, sounded...*young*.

Wilbur closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. He weighed his options. On one hand: dive into the fight head first and finally, *finally* bring things to an end on his own terms. He could feel his powers thrumming under his skin, could feel the instinctive knowledge that it would be a fight he wouldn't be the one to lose. On the other: he could allow Aegis to plead his case. Hear him out, like he refused to do before, the first time they fought.

Or even earlier, Wilbur thought to himself, slightly startled, *on that rooftop, the night of the attacks*.

He'd— he'd never actually found out what Aegis had meant to tell him, had he?

Wilbur hesitated.

A pathetic trickle of guilt tried to wipe out some of the flames, but the anger persisted. The guilt boiled away.

With a deep breath, Wilbur opened his eyes, decision made. "Fine," he gritted out, ignoring the way Aegis started, as if surprised by the choice, "Get down here."

Aegis scrambled the moment the words were out of his mouth, stumbling over to the end of the alley. Wilbur waited, impatient, as the vigilante dangled himself off the edge of the building and let himself drop onto a closed dumpster below, the loud bang nearly covering up the gasp that spilt out of Aegis' mouth. The teensiest part of Wilbur winced at the sound, calling out for him to help. The part that had spent nights acting as a human crutch, that had taught the vigilante how to throw a proper punch after hearing that gasp one too many times in a scrappy alleyway fight, the part that only weeks ago would've rushed to his side and hurriedly asked *where does it hurt?*

The part of him that he'd done his hardest to bury.

He let the crackle of anger drown out the noise instead.

Cautiously, Aegis approached him, less sure on his feet than Wilbur had ever seen. His eyes traveled skittishly around the narrow space, flickering back and forth, from the rooftops to Wilbur, to the street and back again. There were prominent bags beneath them. Either that, or it was just the shadows cast by the hood Aegis kept nervously tugging down. Wilbur hoped it was the former. The man deserved to lose sleep over what he'd done.

"Well?" Wilbur bit out, poorly wrangling his emotions under control. "You wanted to talk. Start talking."

Instantly, it was like a floodgate had been opened. The words poured out of the vigilante, tripping over themselves with nerves and the need to get them out while he could. "Ignition," Aegis gasped, "You have to listen to me—"

"I am."

"Yes, you are, and I thank you for that. But that's not what I mean." Wilbur's scowl deepened, and Aegis backtracked. "Not like— *listen* listen, but you need to understand it's not just—you— I need you to—*fuck!*" The vigilante shook himself, agitated at his own inability to get the right words out. "I just— you can be pissed at me all you want okay? I get it, you're upset—"

"I'm more than upset," Wilbur hissed, fists clenched. "You killed my *friend*."

"Yes, I know that," Aegis stammered, holding up his hands like Wilbur was a caged animal, like he was wild. "I *know* that. But there's more at stake here than just—"

“You *know* that?” Wilbur hotly interrupted, pacing forward as Aegis flinched back. The furious coals in Wilbur’s chest were searing, charring his lungs in a way that sent bitter smoke pouring out his mouth. “Then why haven’t you turned yourself in? You say you know, that you claim responsibility, but here you are lighting fires and fleeing like the fucking coward you are—”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Then what did you mean, huh? Tell me!”

Aegis shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, okay? None of that matters, not right now. Not when Dream—”

All the air evaporated from Wilbur’s lungs. The world fell off its axis; Wilbur was left crooked, having been handed an impossibility. “Doesn’t matter,” he breathed, staring at Aegis in utter disbelief. “Doesn’t *matter*?”

Aegis cringed. “Okay, I should’ve worded that better, but—”

Doesn’t matter. Doesn’t matter. Doesn’t matter. Doesn’t—

“He was my best friend,” Wilbur choked out, furious tears threatening to spill over. His voice was hardly a whisper as he caught Aegis’ wide eyes. “I loved that kid, Aegis,” he croaked. “I swear I did. God, Tommy— He— he was everything to me. He was everything. He was fucking— *everything*!” Aegis’ protests died, his hands falling limp to his sides. It was like all the fight had gone out of him.

“And you took that away,” Wilbur gritted out. He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry. He wanted to say goodbye to his fucking friend. To say all those words again to Tommy’s face and make sure he knew Wilbur meant it, every last syllable. “You took him away. And now— what? You’re trying to tell me he doesn’t *matter*? Are you— are you fucking *serious*?”

Aegis didn’t reply. He just stared at Wilbur, chest hiccuping oddly, mirroring the way Wilbur felt like he was gasping for breath.

“...Yes,” the vigilante finally croaked, visibly trembling. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to say.”

Wilbur recoiled. “Wh—what?”

“Forget about him,” Aegis said, pulling himself together. He tipped his chin up, fixing Wilbur with a tenuous glare that grew stronger every second. “You— you have so many other things to lose, Ignition.” Aegis swallowed, hard. “You have so much left to lose.”

Wilbur was reeling. He couldn’t— he— he was absolutely *pissed* at Aegis, blamed him, condemned him, doubted his every motivation, his every move. But somehow, he’d still— he’d still cared. At least a little. On some fundamental, naive level, he’d hoped, that maybe— maybe—

“Dream is going after you next,” Aegis continued frantically, taking a step closer. “And you’ll lose, Wi–*Ignition!* You’ll *lose*. And I cannot just– fucking– sit by twiddling my fucking thumbs and let that happen!”

He’d *hoped*.

Maybe he hadn’t wanted to lose another friend. Not entirely. Not so soon.

“Ignition! You need to listen to me!”

There were footsteps, and then Aegis was just *there*, in front of him. Wilbur startled, blinking through a fog. *I don’t– I can’t–*

“Let him go, Ignition,” Aegis demanded, voice trembling. “*Please*, just let him go. He’s– he’s not worth it.” A hand grabbed desperately onto the front of Wilbur’s suit, pulling him down to meet Aegis’ watery gaze. “He’s not worth losing you over, okay? You got that?” Aegis choked. “He’s not fucking *worth it*. He never was.”

Wilbur peered into Aegis’ masked face, at the sliver of expression he could see, at how twisted up it was. How the vigilante’s eyes begged him to ignore the burning in his chest, ignore the gaping hole the anger had filled, ignore the way that all he wanted, all he’d *ever* wanted, was to protect the people he loved. To keep them safe. To hold them close and never, for a single *damn second*, let them go.

“He was,” Wilbur whispered, watching as the disbelief unfolded over Aegis’ face, “He always was.”

Aegis blanched, grip on Wilbur’s shirt gone slack. He stumbled back. “No,” the vigilante said, rapidly shaking his head, “No, you can’t– Dream will use–Dream will–Ignition you *can’t!*”

“Shut up, Aegis,” Wilbur gasped, trying to reel himself in, pull himself together. To rebuild a semblance of a person in time to keep everything from falling apart.

“You need to stop this whole– whole revenge arc, alright?” Aegis was rambling at him, stringing together words with reckless abandon. “Just– just *stop*. Find some other way to find peace. Don’t you get it? You’re going to play right into Dream’s hands!”

“Shut *up*, Aegis!” Wilbur’s breath began to speed, his head whirling with too many thoughts to keep track of. The precarious, razor-blade balance began to tip. His feeble patience shriveled, and he teetered on the edge.

“No! I’m not letting you hand yourself over to that sick bastard on a silver platter just because you decided to care about some– some inconsequential, Lower-born, *street trash!*”

A stricken silence fell over the two of them, brought on by the death knell of the final splinters of their old relationship.

Wilbur began to unravel.

All his control snapped. He couldn't handle it, not another word, not anymore. The cliff buckled beneath his feet, flames soaring, roaring through his veins as Wilbur fell headfirst into the anger.

For the very first time, Wilbur let himself *hate*.

His hands ignited in a blinding, brilliant gold. “*You*,” Wilbur seethed, “have no right to say that.”

Aegis stumbled back in shock, staring wide-eyed at the light. He mindlessly mirrored the action, flicking his wrists to activate his shields. They materialized after a few seconds, oddly dimmer than they had been before when the vigilante had used them to deflect Wilbur's previous blasts. The right disc was flickering, and both had faint, hairline cracks running through them.

“Ignition—” Aegis stammered out, “D-Don't—”

Wilbur didn't bother listening. He'd heard enough.

He lunged.

Tommy was panicking.

He didn't— he wasn't sure *what* he'd expected Wilbur to do, to react like, but he hadn't thought Wilbur would try to *kill him*.

Okay, and maybe he'd laid it on a little thick with the insults, but it was for Wilbur's safety. He had to.

He had to.

Tommy yelped as Wilbur lunged at him, a furious snarl on his face, a look in his eyes unlike anything Tommy had ever seen. He desperately dragged up his discs, bracing for a hit. The hero's shoulder slammed into the shields, and Tommy was sent stumbling back with a sharp gasp. His right arm throbbed with pain, pulsing in time with the glow of his dying disc.

A glowing fist swung at his face. Tommy dodged, already breathing hard. There was a distinct pinch in his ribs, the hardly healed fractures and breaks throwing a fit as he danced away from Wilbur's fists.

A swipe at his leg, jump. A spin to get around Wilbur's back, duck beneath the flying beer bottle sent his way. Suck in a desperate breath of the sweltering air left behind by the resulting blast. Pray.

Repeat.

Dodge. Breathe. Ache.

Find a way out of this.

Quick as he could manage, Tommy suddenly dropped his left shield, elbowing Wilbur hard in the side. He ignored the accompanying grunt, falling into a sweeping crouch. Wilbur's calves took the hit, sending the hero staggering back.

Tommy rematerialized his shield, gritting his teeth at the effort it took to dredge the power back up. It felt like dragging liquid cement through his veins, heavy and uncomfortable, slowly shredding his nerves raw. He was already fatiguing, and judging by the hungry look in Wilbur's eyes, they both knew it.

Fuck.

Wilbur swiftly recovered from Tommy's brief offensive stint, falling back into the fight without missing another beat. Steadily, Tommy began to lose ground, the incessant driving force of Wilbur's furious blows pushing him further into the dead-ended alleyway, boxing him in.

"I-Ignition," Tommy gasped, messily blocking another wild punch. The impact reverberated up his right shoulder, and it took everything in him to not to cry out. "Stop—

The only response he got was another bottle smashing into the building next to him, peppering his skin with boiling glass and flame. He staggered further back, reeling.

"Please—"

A kick landed in his side, reaction time too sluggish to catch it. Tommy was knocked back into the wall, rolling to the side barely in time to avoid a fist slamming into it. Brick exploded, the heat blooming across his back as Tommy scrambled away. His body felt like it was on fire, muscles screaming for respite he couldn't give, not if he wanted to end up dead. Head swimming, Tommy devised a stupid, hopeless plan.

If he could get away from Wilbur long enough to climb the dumpster and shimmy up the gutter drain pipes, there was a chance he could lose the hero on the rooftops. He'd always been the better roof jumper between the two of them, and Tommy was desperate to keep Wilbur from fucking himself over even more. He'd do anything, *anything*, to stop Dream's plan from coming to fruition. Even if it meant potentially plummeting to his death. With the way this fight was going, Tommy would gladly take those odds.

He waited until Wilbur came rushing forward again, glowing fists aimed for his open back. Blindly, Tommy whirled, punching up with his right disc to block the incoming strike and slamming into Wilbur's exposed stomach with the other. There was a curse as the wind was knocked out of the hero, and Tommy pulled back, fleeing for the end of the alleyway. Behind him, Wilbur let out an angry shout.

Tommy dove for the dumpster, slamming into the side of it in his haste. He pulled himself up, unsteady on the lid, and practically fell forward onto the drainpipe. One shaking hand over the other, trembling like a leaf, he started to climb, grip slipping, discs getting in the way. All he could do was reduce their size—if he deactivated them now, he'd never find the energy to drag them back out.

There was a clang of boots on metal as Wilbur jumped onto the dumpster behind him. A warm hand grasped his ankle. There wasn't even a chance.

Wilbur ripped him down, and Tommy fell at his feet with crash and a groan. Another kick, and he was on the ground of the alley. The world was spinning. Every breath felt like needles going down.

There was the wrenching sound of metal being torn apart above him. Tommy tried to get up, grabbing at the dumpster in an attempt to stand. His knees gave out.

Wilbur landed on the ground in front of him with a *thump*, brandishing a red-hot section of the drainpipe like a sword. Tommy feebly scooted back, kicking at the concrete. His back hit the wall. He was cornered.

“Trying to run away again?” Wilbur sneered, *”Pathetic.”*

Tommy wheezed, lifting the shields and expanding them back to their full size as they flickered pitifully. Everything sang with pain.

“What, no more shitty excuses? You finally ran out?”

He didn't rise to the provocation. There were no words left. His only response was to lift the discs higher, curling up beneath them.

Wilbur glared down at him. “Fine,” he hissed, hefting the pipe over his shoulder. “If that's how you want to end it, then I'll end it.”

Wilbur swung.

The pipe crashed into the discs, sending spider-webbing cracks through their already battered surfaces. Tommy choked.

Wilbur swung again.

The right disc pulsed, jagged pieces of red falling to the ground, crumbling. Tommy gasped for air, curling up tighter, drawing his arms in. It hurt. It hurt so bad.

Again.

With a cry, the right disc vanished, Tommy's injured shoulder finally giving out. Smashed fragments of his power littered his torn costume, sparkling on the ground. Hopelessly, he braced for another hit.

Wilbur delivered.

Tommy shrieked, the impact and the strain of maintaining his powers tearing him apart. He couldn't sustain this. Black dots spun in his vision, bile creeping up his throat. It was too much.

But he couldn't say anything. Couldn't get it to stop. Because to admit the truth—

Wilbur wound up for another swing.

He couldn't tell Wilbur—he had to keep him safe.

Dream would kill him. Dream would hurt him, and he couldn't— he couldn't hurt Wil like that. He couldn't hurt Wil.

A shuddering cough wracked his body, closer to a sob than anything. A stabbing, blazing pain lanced through his ribs as he did so. His mouth tasted like iron.

He couldn't hurt Wil.

The pipe slammed into his last disc again, a wave of pain rolling up his arm at the blow, the red shield fractured clear through with cracks.

One bleary thought fought its way through the haze of pain.

How much is it going to hurt him when he realizes he's the one who killed you?

Another swing of the pipe. The shield flickered, shattered chunks of it falling to the ground.

Which will hurt more?

Getting him killed?

Or letting him kill you?

Blood dribbled from his nose, coating his lips and chin.

He didn't know.

With a final crash, the pipe in Ignition's hands broke through the shield, shattering it. A wave of exhaustion flooded him, power depleted, nerves alight with pain.

He didn't know.

Slumped against the wall, Tommy peered up at Wilbur through tears. There was a horrible rage on the hero's face, spurred on by a type of hurt so deep that Tommy could only barely see it peeking through. But it was there, the sorrow. In his eyes, it was there.

Wilbur hefted the pipe again with a wordless shout.

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut, wheezing through the blood on his lips.

Wilbur's words echoed in his head, ringing.

“I loved that kid, Aegis.”

With labored breath, Tommy painstakingly cracked his eyes back open. He watched the pipe begin to fall toward him, swung with the intent to break bones, to crush him into nothingness. Swung with the intent to *kill*.

How much is it going to hurt when he realizes?

The air whistled around the pipe, coming faster, faster, faster—

“He was,” Wilbur whispered, staring at him with the most horrible mixture of pride and love and sorrow, “He always was.”

And in that instant, Tommy knew.

With trembling limbs, he forced his arms up, screaming through gritted teeth as the pipe slammed into his palm and forearm. Bone snapped with an ugly crunch. Undeterred, Wilbur yanked back on the makeshift weapon, eager to go for another round. Stubbornly, Tommy held on with one hand, reaching up to his face with the other, struggling to ignore the absolute agony racing up and down his arms.

“Fucking— let *go!*,” Wilbur shouted, trying to yank the pipe from Tommy’s grasp.

“W-Wil—”

“You *bastard*,” Wilbur seethed. His eyes were glazed over with rage, sole focus on the weapon in his hands. “You fucking—

“Wilbur—”

“I’m not failing again,” Wilbur ranted, finally ripping the pipe from Tommy’s hand. His chest rose and fell rapidly, a crazed expression on his face. He wound up. “I’m not letting him down, I’m not—!”

“*Wilbur*,” Tommy rasped, slumped against the wall. His hands had fallen limp to his sides, mask clutched tightly in one of them, exposing the bloody, exhausted mess underneath.

“Look at me. Hey— *Look at me.*”

For a second, Wilbur hesitated. For a second, the clouded fury cleared.

“I’m right here, Wil,” Tommy whispered, staring up at him. He sucked in a ragged breath.

“I’m right h—here.”

Wilbur blinked, hard. Then his eyes blew wide, the pipe slipping from his slack grip, landing on the ground with a sharp clatter. He staggered forward a step, violently shaking hands held out in front of him, like he wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch, but feared a mirage, a trick.

“...Tommy?” he breathed in utter disbelief, “*Tommy?! ”*

Tommy attempted to crack a smile, but with the bloody nose and pain arcing through every nerve, it came out mangled. Wilbur fell to his knees beside him, trembling fingertips reaching out, brushing his cheeks in feather-light touches. Eyes searched Tommy's face, begging for answers, for proof or denial—*something* at least.

“Hey Big Man,” Tommy croaked, letting himself sink further against the wall. The fingers pressed harder, palms now frantically cupping his cheeks. “...You miss me?”

For the second time that day, he watched Wilbur Soot fall apart.

Chapter End Notes

Well then. I'll have you all know, I haven't made myself this emotional while writing something since chapter 13 of Bring Your Son to War Day when Tommy is screaming his heart out about exile. I feel like that's definitely saying something.

This chapter is somewhat shorter than the usual 5k, but as you may have noticed, I upped the chapter count. Essentially I split the original plot of this section in two, so y'all will just have to deal with an extra chapter. I'm sure you're all devastated by this news /j

Apologies for the long wait again, I was just getting back into the swing of things when the news about Techno dropped and it hit me really hard. Had to take a step back for a while, then I got busy. It happens.

Hope you're all doing alright, stay safe and healthy out there. Love you guys <3

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Well then, ladies and gents and my lovely non-binaries too, I have a new chapter for you.

I also have something else— covid! That's right, for the very first time since this whole shebang began, your favorite author and literally all but one person in her family have caught the disease of a lifetime. Which is... really not ideal considering she was supposed to drive with said family to college in *checks calendar* uh, 2 days. Yikes. Not great.

Yeah, things are a bit messy right now. I've spent the last two days in a tree. I haven't packed a single thing. Don't even worry about it.

But on the bright side, I've had plenty of time to write! Yayyyyyyyyyyyy *cue the canned applause*

Here. A chapter.

TW: Blood/injury, lots of guilt and swearing, physical violence

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur was breaking. He was crumbling from the inside out, crushed veins and shattered bones.

He was— he was—

What the hell was he *doing*?

In front of him, a ghost smiled shakily, coughing through gritted teeth. His hands ached to hold more than just the bloodied face, to reach out and feel if the unsteady rise and fall of Tommy's chest was real, tangible. But he held himself back, now.

Too little, too late, you might say.

He couldn't bear to move, to do more, to confirm that this wasn't some nightmare, some horrid, lovely dream that was going to hollow him out completely when he woke up. Because if this was real...

If this was real, then—

Then Wilbur's actions were utterly unforgivable.

“Wil?” A shuddering breath, “You—you good? You’re being real q-quiet right now.” Tommy tried to laugh, but it came out as more of a desperate gasp. “Kinda starting to w-worry me, man.”

You hurt him, his mind wailed, staring wide-eyed at the blood running from the teen’s nose, the exhausted slump of his body, the way his lips twisted in pain, *This is all your fault. You did this.*

“Tommy, I—” *Fuck*. He couldn’t do this. His hands shook from where they were pressed to Tommy’s cheeks. It felt like the world was ending. If the collapse of Tommy’s apartment had been a bombshell, this was cataclysmic. This was his ruination.

And it was all his own fault.

“...This whole time?” Wilbur whispered, staring into Tommy’s tired eyes. It was all he could get to come out. “You— Aegis— you’ve always been—”

He’d never been gone. Wilbur had been mourning him all along, had physically ached with the loss of him, had torn himself apart in the late hours of the night with grief, and he’d been there the whole time, just out of reach.

Tommy nodded slightly, wincing even with the tiny movement. “Kinda makes s-sense we got on so well, y-yeah?”

Wilbur crumpled, collapsing forward. He curled around this boy that meant so much to him, that had meant—*still* meant—everything. “Don’t joke like that,” he begged. “Please, don’t— not after I—after I—” Tears streaked down his face. “You—”

There was a faint pressure on his back, fingers weakly clutching at the fabric of his suit with what little strength they had left. “You didn’t know.”

Wilbur jerked, pulling back like he’d been burned, hands slipping from Tommy’s face. He stared at Tommy through the tears, horror mounting in his chest. The vigilante—because *god*, that’s what he was, what he’d always been—held his gaze. “That’s not a fucking excuse! I hunted you down like you were a goddamn animal— I nearly killed you!”

Wilbur went utterly still, realization creeping through his limbs like frost, like bile up his throat. “I nearly killed you,” he breathed, eyes impossibly wide. He pushed himself further away from Tommy’s limp form, palms scrabbling at the concrete, as if putting distance between them would somehow undo the damage he’d done. Glossy red shards pricked his palms. “Oh god, I nearly—”

Tommy wasn’t dead. He hadn’t been killed in the fire, in the collapse. By some miracle, he was still alive, and Wilbur had nearly ended it all anyway.

”You can’t protect me all the time, Wil. That’s just life.”

“Maybe not.”

He tucked the kid close, as close as he could. Shielded.

"But I can still try."

God, he was such a blind, moronic piece of *shit*—

Tommy watched him with alarm, attempting to sit up. "W—Wil, breathe. Hey—You gotta—" Tommy gasped, falling back against the wall as his arm gave out. *Broken bones*. Broken bones and broken boys and broken brothers.

There was a yawning distance growing between them, the threads tying them together snapping one by one. Both of them were left desperately grasping at straws, trying anything at all to keep what was left of the other from unraveling entirely.

"I'm so sorry," Wilbur choked out, unable to feel any air in his lungs. All he could see was the pipe in his hands, the searing golden light of his hatred. The shards in his hands burned like acid. *Your fault*. "*Fuck Tommy*, I'm so, so sorry— I'm so sorry. You can't— I can't—"

"S'not your f-fault," Tommy rasped, breathing hard, somehow looking apologetic from his sad, slumped position between the dumpster and the wall. As if he held some part of the blame, had played some part in the tragedy that had befallen him. "I should've said something sooner."

And that was just it, wasn't it? Aegis had tried. He'd tried so many times to get Wilbur to understand. The rooftop. The alley earlier this week. Just now, before Wilbur had beaten him into the ground. Begging Ignition to hear what he had to say, over and over and over again.

And never once had he truly listened.

Why hadn't he listened?

Wilbur frantically shook his head. "No, that's not your fault. I should've listened. I should've *listened* to you. Aegis—he was my friend. *You* were my friend, and I brushed it off like it was nothing."

The *like you were nothing* went unsaid, but they both heard the confession loud and clear.

Tommy grimaced. There was no arguing against that. No excuses could be made for Wilbur's behavior, not this time. "Bad timing" only stretched so far.

Wilbur felt the threads snapping, the chasm between them widening with every word, every burden laid at his feet. And he didn't know how to stop it.

"Still," Tommy said, smiling weakly at Wilbur, a sad show of bloodied teeth, "I never meant for this. And for that, I'm sorry."

Wilbur stared at him.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't cut it."

Oh, the irony.

What he'd give to take it back, to turn the tables. To be the one to apologize desperately and get nothing but scorn in return. It was what he deserved, what he wanted.

But time doesn't tick backwards. Mistakes cannot be undone, punches pulled once they've already struck. There is no reversing the fall of a broken thing, there is only glue and careful patience and painstaking time to rebuild. There was only one direction for Wilbur to move in, and that was forward.

Without even thinking, he closed the gap between them, gathering Tommy into his arms as gingerly as possible. The kid yelped in both surprise and pain, stiff only for a second before sinking deep into the hold. They were both shaking. "Shut the fuck up," Wilbur seethed, burying his face in dirty, bloody hair. "You— shut the fuck up. *Shut up.*"

"I was just—"

"No. I don't want to hear another apology. This is my fault, you got that? *Mine.* None of that shit. I don't want it."

Tommy tucked his head in the crook of Wilbur's neck. He could feel the unsteady breaths against his skin, the rattling air. Something cracked inside his chest.

"I should've listened to you," he continued, cradling Tommy impossibly close, tracing gentle, feather-light fingers up and down his back. Trying to hold the kid together, to keep any more fragments from breaking off. Anything to begin to repair the damage he'd done. Anything to start piecing the two of them back together. Anything. "I should've known, somehow. I should've recognized you, used my fucking head for two goddamn seconds—"

"It's not like you could s-see my face," Tommy mumbled. "You had no idea."

Wilbur paused for a second, turning that over in his head. That... that was true. Tommy hadn't ripped the mask off until the last possible second. Not when Wilbur had begun fighting, not when his discs had begun to fail, but only when there was a pipe flying toward his face powered by a grief-filled rampage.

He'd waited until it was a life or death choice. He'd gambled his life on a sloppy catch and broken forearms and *still*, he'd hesitated.

Even if Wilbur had refused to listen to words, Tommy could've shown Wilbur his face from the start. One glimpse, he would've backed off instantly. The whole clusterfuck of a situation would've been avoided.

...So why didn't he?

"Tommy," Wilbur began quietly, "Why did you wait so long to reveal who you were?"

Tommy stilled, going rigid in his arms. He said nothing.

“I get the need to keep your identity a secret, I get that,” Wilbur continued nervously, put off by the kid’s lack of response, “But did you not trust me to— to know? I wouldn’t have gotten mad, I swear, I—” Tommy stayed silent. Wilbur finished his thought, pouring out his worries in hushed tones, the words small and vulnerable, “...Did you think I would betray you? That I would— I would hate you for who you are?”

There was another second of heavy silence, enough time for Wilbur’s mind to begin spiraling into all kinds of self loathing, violently angry at himself for fucking up so badly, for being the type of person so seemingly spiteful that his friend felt unable to share such an integral part of himself. That he’d been so untrustworthy, so fickle, Tommy was *afraid* of—

“No.”

Wilbur’s thoughts ground to a halt. He sat, blinking in surprise as he attempted to process the word.

“...No?”

“No,” Tommy repeated, struggling to sit up. Wilbur helped him, leaning Tommy against his shoulder. “None of it was because of you, Wil. None of it.” Tommy weakly jabbed a finger into his chest, failing to hide the wince of pain that followed the movement. “You didn’t do jack s-shit, you s-stupid fuck. I was trying to keep you *safe*.”

“Keep me... From what? Tommy, what’re you—”

“From Dream!”

“...*Dream*?”

Tommy sighed, cursing under his breath between rasping coughs. “Christ, you really didn’t listen to a *single* thing I s-said—” Wilbur choked on another stab of guilt. Tommy trained his tired gaze on Wilbur, ensuring that he had his attention. “All this shit?” He faintly waved a hand between the two of them, trying to encapsulate everything that had gone wrong in the past two weeks, “It’s Dream’s f-fault. He’s the one behind this— the attacks, the explosions, t-the arson. It’s *Dream*.”

Wilbur shook his head, trying to wrap his mind around it. “But what does that have to do with—”

Tommy’s half-lidded eyes darkened, heavy with anger and a spark of fear. He sagged further into Wilbur’s hold, strength truly beginning to flag. “He said— he said he would kill you if I told you I was alive. And your family.” Tommy swallowed hard, voice cracking. “I couldn’t hurt you like that, Wil. I just couldn’t.”

Wilbur sucked in a sharp breath. “Why would he—”

Weakly, Tommy grasped the front of his shirt, the adrenaline crash hitting him hard. His breaths came out in strained puffs of air. “He was trying— trying to get you to act out, after I broke his serum, he needed a replacement.”

“Serum? Acting out? I—I don’t understand—”

“Wil— The apartment collapse—”

Jagged rebar.

Flames flickering, washing the street with ghostly light.

A stranger slamming into him moments before it all blew to hell, begging Wilbur to save Tommy, who knew Tommy was inside, said he was trapped, said he needed help.

A stranger with bright, acid green eyes.

Wilbur let out a strangled noise as the pieces finally fell into place. *Holy shit. Holy shit—* “He was there. That night, he was in your apartment. Fuck— I saw him leave, Tommy. I saw him *leave.*”

Tommy nodded, eyes fluttering, “It was all D-Dream.”

What had happened in those minutes before Wilbur arrived on the scene? He could only imagine Tommy trapped, hurt, somewhere alone with that villainous bastard and no easy way out. No hope for backup— not when Wilbur had abandoned him earlier that night, off to fight what he thought was the enemy, all while the true threat lurked right under the Guild’s noses.

God, what idiots they’d all been.

Another cold wave of guilt washed over him.

“Shit Tommy, I’m so sorry,” Wilbur said, desperately pressing their foreheads together. More pressure began to build at the back of his eyes. “I left you alone. And— and then you were just trying to explain, and I hurt you. God—you let me beat the *shit* out of you. You shouldn’t have done that.” His breath hitched. “Fuck, Tommy, why did you let me do that?”

With a jolt, Wilbur realized he really should be saving this conversation for *after* he’d taken Tommy to get medical attention. For fuck’s sake, what was he *doing—*

Tommy fell further into him, eyes squeezed shut, voice barely above a breathless whisper. A confession. “I was scared, Wilbur. I was so scared, I— I didn’t want to lose you.”

The mangled remains of Wilbur’s heart clenched inside his chest, threatening to strangle him.

Get your shit together, Wilbur.

“Well,” Wilbur choked out, carefully gathering Tommy into his arms and preparing to get up, “You don’t have to worry about that, okay? I’m going get you to medical, and you’re going to be just fine. I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

“Promise?” Tommy whispered, on the brink of passing out.

Wilbur stood, wincing at the noise of protest that came with the movement. “Promise.” He hefted Tommy a little higher, backing out of the bloody, smashed up corner. “Now, let’s get you—”

“Oh, isn’t that *sweet*. You’ve already made up, have you?”

Both hero and vigilante stiffened at the sound of the taunt. Slowly, Wilbur turned to face the intruder standing at the mouth of the alleyway. “Probably shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep, Ignition,” Dream drawled, feet planted in a ring of half-dissolved purple particles, “It only leads to disappointment.” The villain languidly tipped his head in Tommy’s direction, whose face was twisted up in fear, barely conscious. “And I think you’ve hurt him enough already, don’t you?”

“Stay the fuck away from him,” Wilbur snarled, taking a step back, shielding Tommy’s face from view. “Don’t you *fucking* touch him.”

Dream let out a laugh, the sound bone dry and grating. “Oh come *on*. Did you even *hear* the kid, Ignition? I don’t give a shit about him.”

In his arms, Tommy flinched. Wilbur bristled. “Don’t do that.”

The villain cocked his head to the side, trying to play off a picture of innocence. “Do what?”

“Act like he’s nothing,” Wilbur spat, attempting to dredge up anger through the weight of his exhaustion, “Like he’s not worth the time. You’re the one who dragged him into your fucking mess in the first place.”

Dream shrugged. “I suppose that’s true. He was rather useful, after all. Served his purpose. Played a wonderful martyr, just like I asked. I have to thank him for that.”

Suddenly, the villain’s entire demeanor shifted, like flipping a switch. The casual air melted away, replaced by a bubbling, broiling malice. Dread began to pool in Wilbur’s gut. Without his signature mask, Wilbur could easily watch as his acid green eye began to glow.

“However,” Dream hissed, puppet strings slowly snaking from his hands and pooling on the ground, “he did fail to entirely uphold his end of the deal.”

A freezing wave of fear washed through him. Wilbur stumbled back. Dream matched him pace for pace. *Oh fuck—*

In his arms, Tommy abruptly shifted, prying one of his arms out of Wilbur’s hold with gritted teeth. Wilbur glanced down at him, startled to find tears in his eyes. He frowned, anger and panic momentarily forgotten in his confusion. “Tommy, what’re you—”

The kid slowly jerked his wrist in a familiar movement, letting out a quiet scream. Wilbur flinched in horror. Dream, too, was surprised, and his advance stuttered for a second, caught off guard by the sound. Glancing at the villain, Wilbur’s eyes widened, realizing what the vigilante was trying to do. “*Shit—*Tommy, don’t—!”

It was too late. For a split second, a faint, ghostly red light appeared, the shield little more than a mirage before dissipating again. Before he could do anything, Tommy's eyes rolled into his head, and he went entirely limp against Wilbur, out for the count.

"They're fucking busted, you idiot," Wilbur muttered, slightly fond, once again feeling a strong stab of guilt at being the reason why. He adjusted his hold on the now unconscious teen, trying not to cry over the whole situation. *Nothing left to give, and he's still trying to protect you.*

You never deserved him to begin with.

Across from him, Dream snorted. Wilbur turned to look at him, shocked by the sheer number of strings rising up around the villain, curling through the air like a writhing pit of snakes. "Jesus, now *that* was pathetic," he called, laughing. "I mean, a touching show of love and all that, but *really*? In the end, it means nothing. After all," he grinned, teeth glinting in the light, "You're still going to die."

In seconds, the strings wound around his ankles, ripping him off his feet. Wilbur barely had enough time to twist himself, forcing his back to take the brunt of the hit in order to spare Tommy from the fall. He slammed into the ground with a gasp, sprawled on the alleyway floor.

Desperately, he let go of Tommy with one hand, fingers lighting up gold. He groped at the tendrils winding around his limbs, exploding them with muffled firecracker pops and emerald bursts of light.

It wasn't enough. It wasn't even a *fight*. They tied him down, roots burying into the earth, dragging him down with them. Tommy's unconscious form was pressed into his chest, and Wilbur struggled to breathe from the pressure.

Faintly, he registered footsteps. Dream loomed over him, blocking out the watery winter sun, peering down at his helplessness with a sneer. "The people's hero," he taunted, lifting a foot and placing it tantalizingly close to Wilbur's throat, "reduced to groveling in the *dirt*."

The foot pressed down. Wilbur choked, vision swimming with the sudden pressure. His free hand flailed, searching for anything he could use as a weapon. A scrap of fabric, a wrapper, fuck— he'd even take a goddamn *pebble* at this point.

Dream pressed harder, and black dots began to press at the edge of his vision. *Please*, Wilbur begged, *I can't let it end like this. I need to fix things with Tommy. I need to make this right.* Please.

His fingertips brushed against cool metal, crumpled out of its original round shape. Distantly, Wilbur felt himself grin.

The pipe.

He closed his fingers around the edge of it, darkness closing in, feeling the metal warp and melt under his touch. With what little movement he could manage, Wilbur wrapped himself

around Tommy the best he could and waited.

The explosion came a second later.

The pressure on his neck disappeared, and Wilbur gasped for air, retching. The strings tangled around his limbs loosened for a moment, and he wriggled away from them, brushing his hand over the ones in his reach, blasting them out of existence. It wasn't enough. He'd only bought himself a few precious seconds, he knew that, and grimaced as he felt the grip of Dream's power tighten once again. He pulled Tommy closer, curling over him and bracing for the next hit.

"You—" Dream seethed, recovered from the blast. *"You insolent little—"*

The sound of pounding feet. Strings whipping through the air. A wordless yell.

Wilbur squeezed his eyes shut, waiting.

Waiting.

And yet...nothing came.

...What?

Tentatively, he pried one eye open, confused. Both eyes quickly went wide at the sight before him.

Crouched above him, braced against the concrete floor of the alleyway, was Techno, a dozen strings protruding from his back. His brother glanced down at the offending things, raising an unimpressed eyebrow. "Well," he deadpanned, "that was a waste of a good shirt."

In one swift, smooth motion, Techno drew the sword sheathed at his side, slicing through the puppet strings in one fell swoop. He cast a quick glance behind him, taking in the sight of Wilbur wrapped around Tommy's unconscious form. A flicker of surprise ran across the other hero's face, no doubt caused by recognition of the costume Tommy wore, but he quickly moved past it. Techno met Wilbur's eyes, asking a silent question.

You okay?

Shakily, Wilbur nodded.

And that was all the confirmation Techno needed.

"Here's the thing, Dream," Techno drawled, turning away from Wilbur, but keeping himself firmly planted in front of his brother. "You've been a pain in everyone's ass for far too long. And I, for one," his voice dipped dangerously, posture sharpening into that of someone ready for a fight, "particularly don't appreciate you tryin' to murder Ignition here."

Dream shifted on his feet, attempting to keep up his veneer of control, but his unease slipped through the cracks. "Revenant," he greeted with a crooked smile, "My, what a surprise. Can't

say I was expecting you.” The villain shrugged, but the movement was jerky, unsettled. “But I never mind a challenge.”

“Is that so,” Techno replied, unimpressed. “...You say that as if you expect to win.”

Dream’s smile widened. He lifted his hands, tendrils flowing out of them. “Oh, but I *do*.” His newly purple eye glinted, and Wilbur stiffened, realizing what he was about to do.

“Tech—” he croaked, squeezing the words through his abused throat, “Watch out, he’s going to teleport—”

Purple particles appeared in the air, and Techno braced, trying to calculate where the villain would end up. Before Dream had a chance to make the jump, however, there was a trident sailing through the air, punching through Dream’s side and pinning him to the wall. Wilbur gaped.

“Nice shot, Warden,” Techno complimented, unfazed. “You couldn’t have done that before he started on the whole dramatic monologue thing?”

Up on the rooftop, Warden shrugged. “I just got here, dude. I don’t know what you want from me.”

Techno considered this for a second. “Yeah, fair enough. Alright,” he said, turning away from Warden and advancing on Dream, who was slowly recovering from his stunned state.

“Warden, get down here and help me restrain this guy’s overly dramatic ass. Are Blaze and Motley here yet?”

“Just arrived,” Blaze chimed in, coming up beside Warden, slightly out of breath. No doubt he’d run halfway across the city for this. “Motley’s a block or two behind me, he’ll be here soon.”

“Great, get down here and help Ignition and Aegis off the ground, no doubt they’re both in need of plenty of medical attention by now.”

The other heroes startled, Blaze letting out an alarmed, “Wait—Aegis?!”

Techno cast him an unimpressed glance. “You need your hearing checked?”

Blaze shook his head. “Of course not. But what do you mean by—”

“I’m sure Ignition can explain later,” Techno said, shooting Wilbur a look that said *and that’s a guarantee*, before stalking over to Dream and placing the blade of his sword at the villain’s throat, who stiffened at the touch, glaring. Techno glared right back. “Now move it.”

At that, the heroes quickly hopped down into the alleyway, Warden making his way to Techno’s side, Blaze to Wilbur’s.

“C’mon man,” Blaze said, slowly helping him sit up. “Let’s get you out of here.”

Wilbur complied easily at first, head swimming with exhaustion, guilt and pain. He only resisted the help when Blaze attempted to take Tommy from his arms, trying to convince Wilbur that he was in no way fit to carry the kid back to the Guild Tower and its healers. Too bad Wilbur didn't give a shit. He wasn't letting Tommy go, not now, not ever.

Despite being pretty out of it, Wilbur could be a stubborn son of a bitch when he wanted to. Eventually, Blaze gave in, sitting beside Wilbur to wait until Motley arrived and the two of them could haul him back to the Tower together, grumbling the whole time.

While they waited, Wilbur stared blearily down at Tommy's bruised face, a million and one emotions coursing through his chest, guilt strongest of all. He carefully set his chin atop Tommy's grimy hair and sighed.

Wilbur had fucked up. Big time.

But the question remained: was it irreparable?

Time can't tick backwards. Scars heal, but they remain just that—scars. Wilbur Soot was many things: impulsive and selfish and stupid—but he had never been a fool. There was no returning to the perfect blissful ignorance of before. This awful, convoluted wreck they'd found themselves in wasn't something you could just brush aside with the power of a few hugs and kind reassurances.

No, fixing this would take time and patience, would take shouting matches and waking up from sweat-soaked nightmares, turning *what-ifs* over and over in his head and wondering if they could've done something different, something better.

But that was the future. For now, Tommy was safe in Wilbur's arms, and Wilbur would be damned if he didn't keep it that way. He'd get him to medical, give him the chance to heal.

From there, well... who knows.

Wilbur simply let himself hope.

Chapter End Notes

So! This is essentially the last full "chapter" of this work. Chapter 16 is an epilogue of sorts (I mostly call it that just cause it's a time skip and will probably be a bit shorter than the usual chapters), and then we're done! Kinda crazy, if you think about it.

Hope you guys enjoyed, I was really happy with this one. Finally got to use some dialogue I've had squirreled away since July of last year, if you can believe it. Made my little monkey writer brain very happy.

Hoping everyone is in better health than I currently am. Make sure you get some sleep and drink some water folks, it's crazy out here. Stay safe, love you guys! <3

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This is it, everyone. The last chapter. The final note in this epic symphony of ours. It's been a long, complicated journey. I'm almost sad to see it go.

I hope you've enjoyed so far, that you find the conclusion satisfying. I know I do.

Thank you for all the kudos, comments, and engagement with my work. Thanks for the well wishes especially, the encouragement and kind words. Anyone who was concerned about the covid, fear not. I'm all better. Busy trying to figure out how tf college is supposed to work now instead. It's really odd, that's all I've got to say so far. But anyway.

One last chapter.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy hummed, staring out over the city skyline.

It had snowed earlier, the remnants of it drifting through the air like sparks, catching the fading sun as it began to sink below the horizon. By tomorrow the thin, pristine blanket would be little but muddied slush on the sidewalk. For now, though, it filled the twilight with a sharp sense of cleanliness, carrying with it a peculiar, muffled silence.

Tommy shivered, the cold air soaking through the hastily stitched up clothes of his old Aegis suit. His breath puffed out in golden clouds, ribs pinching with the movement, but only slightly. He chalked the twinge up to karma for sneaking out.

Wilbur was definitely going to kick his ass when he finally realized Tommy wasn't taking a post-dinner nap like he'd so adamantly claimed. And then Techno would definitely kick Wilbur's ass when he found out just how bad Wilbur was at monitoring Tommy, followed by Phil taking out *both* of them for squabbling again. He almost felt bad he was going to miss such a spectacle. It was prime entertainment.

The sun cut the horizon, framed perfectly by the crumbling cornice of the library. He hummed again, the sound settling in his chest. *Almost*.

A few more snowflakes drifted past his nose. In the fading light, a couple of them winked with violet light, odd-looking specks. A quiet, crooked grin pulled at the corners of Tommy's mouth.

“You know, if you’re still trying to convince the general public that Aegis and Thomas are two different people,” a light voice commented from behind him, “Haunting the roof of your place of work is most definitely not the way to do that.”

Tommy merely shrugged, jerking his chin in the direction of the sunset. “Sure, but it’s got quite the view.”

Unceremoniously, Ranboo plopped down beside him, pulling his goggles up and considering the sight with a tilted head. The dusty light washed his Ender getup in burnt shades of orange. “Hm. Can’t argue with you there.”

A snowflake settled on the nose of Tommy’s mask, now scrubbed clean of any blood. The Soots had tried to throw the thing out, promising to get him a new costume. He agreed to an upgrade, but the moment Techno dumped the old suit into the garbage can and turned his back, Tommy had squirreled it away in his new room on the second floor. Tommy crossed his eyes trying to look at the minuscule ice crystal, earning a quiet huff of amusement from Ranboo.

“Careful,” the other vigilante remarked, teasing, “You don’t need any more injuries. Don’t strain yourself.”

Tommy scoffed, squeezing his eyes shut to clear the pinch forming at the back of his eyes. “You sound like Phil.”

“Well, Phil’s right.”

Without looking, Tommy reached over and punched Ranboo in the shoulder. The other boy made an indignant sound, shuffling away to be out of range of any further attacks. Neither of them acknowledged the stiffness of Tommy’s movement, the newfound jerkiness of his arms. The way he didn’t have to pull his punches because he couldn’t hit hard enough in the first place.

The way the twilight hid the faint tremor in the hands that fell back into Tommy’s lap.

The Guild had access to more resources than should honestly be reasonable, and their medical capabilities were outstanding. They had to be. Keeping their heroes intact and pretty for the cameras was no easy feat. Health potions and minor healers claimed all the credit for that.

But potions and healers are only good for physical injuries. Broken bones, bruised knees, bloody noses— you name it. You’re good as gold, righter than rain in minutes.

The thing about potions, though, is that they do nothing for an individual’s powers.

Time and a whole lot of luck was the only cure for an injury like that.

“I should’ve just come to live with you instead,” Tommy grumbled, tucking his trembling fingers between his knees, “I’d take your couch over their house any day. Those guys are the *worst*.”

Ranboo quirked an eyebrow, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Really?”

“Yes *really*. They’re clingy as fuck. Even clingier than you and Tubbo, and *that’s* saying something.” Tommy jammed an accusing finger in the other vigilante’s direction, and Ranboo snorted, brushing off the complaint. Tommy’s smile dimmed, drooping at the edges. He shifted, eyeing Ranboo at the edge of his peripheral. The faux whine to his tone fell away, turning into something more hesitant with an awkward clear of the throat. “How, uh– How’s he doing, by the way? With the whole–” he gestured vaguely at his stomach, “You know... thing he’s got going on.”

Ranboo’s expression fell, amusement drained by the change in topic. He swallowed, staring off into some middle distance, reliving something awful Tommy had only gotten bits and pieces of in the form of rushed news and incomplete retellings. “He’s...alright. Well, alright as he can be. Refused to let it get him down. You know him.”

“Pissed you won’t let him out of bed yet?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Ranboo side-eyed him, a frown tugging at the edge of his expression. There was a weight to his look that Tommy had rarely seen, if ever. It tugged at something in his chest, guilt bubbling in his throat. “He’s mad at you too, you know. For ditching us like that.”

Tommy cringed, turning away and biting at the inside of his cheek. He crossed his arms over his chest, holding the tightness in. “...I figured.”

“He’s planning to kick your ass the moment he’s able– his words, not mine. And then probably give you the biggest hug in history.” Ranboo sighed, shaking his head. “You scared the shit out of us both, dude. Me especially.”

Tommy dipped his head, closing his eyes. He knew that. He did. It was a shitty thing to do, abandoning his friends like that. He’d felt awful about it ever since Ranboo had managed to track him down a few days after the memorial, the fellow vigilante torn between fretting over his injuries, chewing him out, and struggling to admit how rough of a shape his partner was in. The guilt had been gnawing at Tommy’s insides ever since. This, however, was the first time either of them had been brave enough to bring it up outright.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, hugging himself. His fingers trembled against his sleeves, the knitted red yarn covering them scratching gently against the plasticky fabric of his coat. “I feel awful for leaving you alone to deal with that.”

“...You don’t regret it though.”

Tommy opened his eyes, peering through frozen lashes at his friend. Ranboo met his gaze with a soft look of understanding. There were exhausted bags under his eyes, yes, perhaps a hint of frustrated resignation, but no anger. Never anger.

After all, they both knew how this game was played. It was the way of their world– sometimes, all you cared about was making sure that at the end of the day, you still had someone left to love. Someone left to protect.

That was the whole point in the first place, wasn't it? To give people the chance to keep loving, to keep living. To make sure they got home to hug their family and wake up to the next sunrise. To live and not have to hold their breath the way the two of them always did when a familiar alias popped up on screen.

"No," Tommy whispered, "I don't."

A faint smile creased the edges of Ranboo's eyes. He sighed heavily, expelling all the bad things built up in his own chest. "I figured."

They both watched as the last ray of sunlight winked out behind the horizon, taking any illusion of warmth with it. Tommy shivered again. Man, he really hoped he didn't get sick from this. He'd never hear the end of it.

Easily, an arm settled over his shoulders, tugging him close. Tommy leaned into Ranboo's warmth, happily soaking up the feeling. Contentment bloomed in his chest, flowers pushing up between the rubble. Regrowth despite the harsh, unforgiving circumstances.

Life— always such a fragile, stubborn thing.

Remarkable, isn't it?

"How's Wilbur doing?" Ranboo asked quietly, the words rumbling through them both.

Tommy gave a half shrug, tipping his head over to rest it on Ranboo's shoulder. "Less of a mess than before. He's having a hard time with the nightmares, always has. It's been... rough."

Ranboo's head settled on his. "I'm sorry."

"It is what it is, you know?" Tommy huffed out a breath, pushing his anger at the injustice of it all away. He'd channel it later, use it to fuel his patrols when he got the chance. If he kept things casual, light, it allowed him to actually talk without getting choked up. And he wanted that. To just let it out. To do better. "It was a really, really shitty situation. But we both made it out, in the end. And that's what matters."

Ranboo hummed, giving him a soft squeeze. "Still got a ways to go, huh?"

"Definitely," Tommy admitted. "Phil set Wil up with this therapist lady to help him work through all his emotions 'n stuff. He says I'm next, if I want to. Miss—uh, fuckin'— Legume or some shit like that."

Ranboo cast him a critical look, obviously biting back a laugh. "*Legume?*"

Tommy threw up his hands. "Look dude, I don't know! I don't keep track of all his shit. All I know is that Wil's getting better." He sniffed, swiping a hand under his nose. The stars had begun to come out, if only barely. It was pretty, the intoxicating smog of twilight paired with the shine of street lamps down below. "He can look at me with something besides guilt again," Tommy muttered softly, gazing out over the city. "...S' nice."

"I'm so sorry, Toms. I promise, I'm going to make it up to you. I promise you, I will—"

"Wilbur," Tommy said, grabbing the man's shoulders, cutting out the frantic words. He nodded at the room they were standing in, Tommy's new bedroom. His new place, safe at home with Wilbur's family. The room Wilbur insisted he take after the Guild released them from the clinic, babbling about taking care of him and Techno says you should stay anyway, and Phil wanted to meet you, and I need you with me, Tommy, please. I want to fix this.

"I know, okay?" He felt Wilbur's shoulders slump beneath his grip, heard the heavy exhale. He gave his best friend a hopeful smile. "I know. And it's okay."

A gentle nudge pulled him out of his thoughts. Ranboo had lifted his head, staring at him with thinly veiled concern. "You alright?"

Tommy blinked, pushing the memory away for another time. "Yeah, I was just thinkin'."

Ranboo hesitated, looking unconvinced, but allowed it. "Thinking about what?"

Tommy considered the question for a second. About what, indeed.

"...Healing, I 'spose."

"Oh?"

"Yeah." Carefully, Tommy lifted left his arm, holding it out in between them. He pushed past the shakiness, taking a deep breath. As he let it go, a familiar warmth trickled through his veins, like honey, like nectar. Slowly, the air in front of Tommy's arm shimmered, his disc melting into existence. It was a small affair, the shield hardly bigger than a dinner plate. The light it gave off was rather dim, muted. A far cry from what they used to be. Still, the disc was whole again, only a few hairline cracks lacing through its surface, reflecting the lamplight in odd ways. "See?"

Ranboo watched as Tommy took another steadying breath, letting the powers fade back out with the exhale, taking the comfortable red glow with it. His eyes tracked Tommy's hand as it began to tremble again, hanging in the air between them.

Tenderly, he reached out and took it, stilling the tremors with a gentle squeeze.

"I'm glad," he said, holding it carefully between them.

Tommy turned his gaze away from their tangled palms, staring out over the city he'd given so much for. Even now, after everything, it had never felt more like home. Like *his*.

He squeezed back.

"Me too, Ranboo."

Above them the stars shone, fighting against the endless haze of the city lights and somehow succeeding despite the odds. The air was cold and tasted of snow. Of that fresh, stark clarity only a cold night can bring, like a slate wiped clean.

It tasted of second chances.

“Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Well then. It looks like we've come to the end of things, haven't we? Quite the wild ride, this past year.

I don't think I've had a stronger love/hate relationship with a work. There was many a day when I wanted to drop this and bury it in a hole. I'm glad I didn't. I'm rather fond of the ending, now that we're finally here.

Thank you so much everyone for sticking around, for your comments and art and kindness. I couldn't be more grateful to have such a wonderful, considerate group of readers. Stay safe, stay healthy. I love you all. <3

If anyone still likes me as an author, I'm planning another work that I'm incredibly excited about. Alliumduo, anyone? Did I hear Alliumduo? There's even a current attempt to pre-write chapters. *Me*, prewriting chapters. It's incredible. There's some teaser art up on my instagram [here](#), if anyone wants to take a look. Feel free to come hang out there, I don't post a whole lot, but my dm's are open if anyone wants to have a friendly chat or something :)

And that's it.

Until next time, then. *salutes*

End Notes

Absolutely fantastic fan art of Aegis by @starchild989_ that deserves far more recognition:
[Aegis](#)

Works inspired by this one

[One Day, I'll Focus On The Future. \(Or Not\) !!!!!!!!! DISCONTINUED !!!!!](#) by [NatureArty](#)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!